

Ria van den Brandt

# ETTY HILLESUM

An Introduction to Her Thought



LIT

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Photo cover: Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam

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in memory of Kees Korenhof (1949-2012)

*(...) one must approach a book in the same way one approaches one's fellow men. Without preconceived ideas or demands. Sometimes one forms an image of the work after the first few pages and clings to that image, refusing to let it go – often doing violence to the author. Human beings must be granted their full freedom and so must books. Every expression used by a person or found in a book may cast a sudden and surprising new light, shattering our fixed ideas and the certainty into which they have lulled us.*

Etty Hillesum, 13 December 1941

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## Translator's Foreword

One of the main tasks a translator has to set himself is to do justice to the style of the original. In *Etty Hillesum: An Introduction to Her Thought* I had to do justice to two styles: the author's, Ria van den Brandt, and the style of her subject, Etty Hillesum, who is quoted extensively throughout this book.

I hope that I have succeeded in rendering Van den Brandt's transparent and unadorned text into an equally transparent and unadorned English text. I have also made an effort to be as precise as possible, because Van den Brandt always picks her words carefully.

Where the Hillesum quotes are concerned I was faced with the problem that many English speaking readers of this book are probably familiar with the English edition of the diaries and letters, *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, translated by Arnold J. Pomerans and published in 2002. For the sake of these readers I have tried to stay as close to the existing English translation as I could. However, at times this was impossible.

In accordance with the Anglo-Saxon translation tradition Arnold J. Pomerans (1920-2005) chose above all to produce a readable text, cleaning up the style of the original. He has done an admirable job for believers in this method of translating; his English edition is a wonderful read and the sentences are never awkward but always smooth and flowing. Whenever Pomerans encountered a puzzling sentence he made an honest guess as to what Hillesum could have meant and used that, suddenly making an obscure passage crystal clear. This approach, I'm sure, is pleasant for a lot of readers.

But Pomerans has done more than that. In an effort to either protect Etty Hillesum's legacy against the astonishment or even indignation of the readers, or to protect the readers against the harsh way Etty Hillesum at times expressed herself, he periodically censored the original. A passage about Hillesum's unborn child that is dealt with in this book is a good example of this censorship. In the original diary entry Etty Hille-

sum addresses the little embryo in her womb with these words: "I assault you with hot water and gruesome instruments." Pomerans lets her say, "I assault myself with..." In the original diary Etty Hillesum continued, "I shall fight you patiently and relentlessly until you have dissolved into nothingness." This too was a bit too cold-blooded for Pomerans, who left out one word, giving the sentence an altogether milder character: "I shall fight patiently and relentlessly until you have dissolved into nothingness." This, I fear, is only one of many examples. In these instances I have of course followed the original diary. Moreover, because I feel that the inquisitive reader has a right to be informed, I have added explanatory footnotes whenever Van den Brandt deals with a passage where the English edition of Hillesum's diaries and letters withholds things from the English-speaking reader.

Harry Monkel

## **Preface**

On September 7, 1943, a freight train containing 987 Jews left the Dutch transit camp of Westerbork, in northeastern Holland, for Auschwitz. Twenty-nine-year-old Etty Hillesum was in the twelfth car. In the first freight car were her parents, Louis Hillesum and Riva Hillesum-Bernstein, and her younger brother Mischa Hillesum. The Hillesum family did not know exactly where they were going, but they did know that they were going ‘to the East’, and that ‘the East’ did not bode well for their future. Etty Hillesum threw some postcards from the train. Apparently she wanted to reassure the friends who stayed behind, for she wrote, “We left the camp singing, Father and Mother firmly and calmly, Mischa too. We shall be traveling for three days.” And, on a postcard to Maria Tuinzing, the last line reads, “Will you wait for me?” This short sentence later proved to be the last one from her written legacy. Etty Hillesum never returned from her long journey; she was killed in the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. According to the Dutch Red Cross her date of death was November 30, 1943. Her parents also perished in Auschwitz, her brother Mischa in Warschau.

### **The Brief Life of Etty Hillesum**

Esther (Etty) Hillesum’s brief life began on January 15, 1914, in Middelburg, in the southwestern Dutch province of Zeeland. Both of Etty’s parents were Jewish: Levie (Louis) Hillesum (1880-1943) and Riva (Rebecca) Hillesum-Bernstein (1881-1943). Riva was born in Potchev (Russia). In 1907 she went to Amsterdam after a pogrom. She was registered as a Russian teacher and in 1912 she married the classicist Louis Hillesum. After the birth of their eldest child in 1914 the Hillesums had two sons: Jacob (Jaap) Hillesum (1916) and Michael (Mischa) Hillesum (1920). In 1924 they moved to Deventer, in the eastern province of Overijssel, where Louis worked as a classics teacher and deputy principal at the local grammar school. From 1928 to 1940 he was the school’s

principal. Being Jewish, Louis lost his job in October 1940, five months after the German invasion, and in 1943 both parents were forced to move to Amsterdam. During the great raid of June 20 and 21, 1943, they were rounded up with their youngest son and deported to Westerbork. By that time Etty was already in the camp. Jaap would later be deported to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. He did not survive the Holocaust either.

In Deventer the Hillesums were members of the Jewish Congregation until 1937, but they did not take part in Jewish religious life. The Hillesums hardly ever went to the synagogue and they did not keep the Sabbath. Nevertheless daily life in the Hillesum household did have some Jewish traits. According to Frits Grimmelikhuisen, co-founder of the Etty Hillesum Center in Deventer, Riva was in some ways a genuine Yiddish Mama: continually talking about food and expressing her motherly love with typical Jewish dishes such as “chicken soup, chicken legs and hard-boiled eggs”.<sup>1</sup> Yet, contemporaries called the Hillesums’ a chaotic and messy household with a Slavic rather than a Jewish atmosphere. According to the Belgian historian Els Lagrou,<sup>2</sup> Louis Hillesum, who was himself the grandson of a rabbi and had had an orthodox upbringing, had “deliberately broken with the protective but restricted environment of his youth”. His Eastern-European-Jewish wife’s personal history was of an altogether different kind. Lagrou wrote that “from her homeland she brought a full understanding of what it means to be persecuted as a Jew”. She was generally characterized as a difficult woman (boisterous, chaotic, dominant, unbalanced), but this difficult disposition probably had to do with her traumatic past. Though very critical of Riva, Etty realized that life had been no bed of roses for her mother.

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Frits Grimmelikhuisen, *Frits, Een mens kan hier niet gedijen.....: Een geschreven en/of gesproken familiealbum over Etty Hillesum en haar familie in Deventer, Amsterdam en Westerbork*, Deventer, Etty Hillesum Center, 2003 (in-house publication; earlier editions in 1999 en 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Els Lagrou, *Etty Hillesum, 1914-1943: Een historisch-biografische studie*, Leuven, 1985 (Master’s thesis, Catholic University of Leuven).

Etty Hillesum completed primary school and grammar school in Deventer. She read a great deal, especially in the books from her father's library. Right from childhood she was interested in her Russian roots. She read Russian literature and wanted to master the language. San van Droogen, one of her fellow pupils at grammar school, remembered her as an "attractive, merry pyknic, funny, intelligent and with a clear, high-pitched voice". At grammar school Etty took an optional Hebrew course and joined a Jewish youth movement for a time. Els Lagrou characterized this movement as a heterogeneous club "without ties with the Jewish Congregation or the Zionist movement". On June 13, 1932, she graduated and left Deventer to study law in Amsterdam. It is likely, Lagrou proposed, that after earning her BA on June 6, 1935, she took a break from law to concentrate on studying Russian. She may have had lessons from her mother in the same period. In 1937 she returned to the study of law while also teaching Russian to a group of enthusiasts. In the summer of 1939 she received her MA, but she appears to have been completely indifferent about her new degree. She remained very interested in the Russian language and culture, and attended lectures in Amsterdam and in the old university town of Leiden, near The Hague. Her diaries reveal that her future aspirations had nothing to do with her law degree. Rather she saw herself as a psychologist and writer.

In the thirties Etty Hillesum lived in several lodgings in Amsterdam. In the spring of 1937 she moved to the Gabriël Metsustraat near the Rijksmuseum. In exchange for some housekeeping duties she was given a room in the mansion of the accountant and widower Han Wegerif (1879-1946). Han Wegerif, whom Etty called "Pa Han" (Dad Han), became her lover. The other occupants were Wegerif's son Hans, the German housekeeper Käthe Fransen, the student Bernard Meylink and, from 1942 onwards, the nurse Maria Tuinzing. Until her final departure this house would be Hillesum's home base. It was here that she first began her diary on March 9, 1941. Keeping a diary had everything to do with her meeting the German-Jewish refugee Julius Spier (1887-1942). Julius Spier was a palm reader and a Jungian trained depth psychologist: a psycho-chirologist. After some hesitation on her part he became her therapist

and probably advised her to write down her feelings and thoughts in a diary. Spier's maxim was "Become who you are!". The daily writing was meant to help her with the depth psychological process of self-realization. It was Spier's intention to liberate people from things that hindered their growth, such as "inhibitions, inferiority complexes, false ideas". One of his unorthodox methods was wrestling. When Etty met the palm reader she must have been ready to organize her mind, and Spier was just the person she needed: "He would bring order to my inner chaos, harness the forces now at loggerheads within me." In spite of her skepticism Etty could only conclude that "this complete stranger, this S. with his complicated face", worked miracles for her. She soon fell under the influence of "his magical personality" and felt strongly attracted to him. Extensive parts of her diary addressed her amorous feelings for Spier.

Contrary to her housemates, Etty hardly took an interest in politics, so initially the war seemed distant in her diary. The two dominant spheres of influence in the diary are the atmosphere in the Wegerif household and the spiritual-therapeutic atmosphere of the Spier circle. Etty's diary reveals that passionate political discussions often took place in Wegerif's house. On these occasions Etty's pacifism raised many an eyebrow. When anti-Jewish measures followed one another in the summer of 1942 Etty wrote, "Bernard's Jewish friend had them ask me after the latest promulgations, 'Didn't I now agree that all Germans should be done away with, preferably hung, drawn, and quartered?'" No, Etty did not agree. She was of the opinion that, through daily practice, every person should strive for an attitude of love and sympathy. Her attitude was nurtured and stimulated by the spiritual-therapeutic atmosphere in which she often found herself: the enclave around Spier, or the "Spier Club". The Spier Club mainly consisted of female pupils, often religiously inspired. They attended his lessons (twice a week), brought on new candidates, and went to his lectures. The inner core of the Spier Club included Julius Spier, the very devout Henny Tideman (1907–1989) or Tide, and from 1941 onwards Etty. According to the postwar testimony of Hanneke Starreveld, who at the time was friends with Julius Spier and Etty, both Spier and Tideman greatly influenced Etty's faith in God.

On July 6, 1942, Etty wrote in her diary, “From all sides our destruction creeps up on us, and soon the ring will be closed and no one at all will be able to come to our aid. All the little loopholes that are still left will soon be stopped up.” One way to protect herself against deportation was a position with the Jewish Council, which had been established by the German occupiers in February 1941 as a Jewish organization to administer the Jewish community in the Netherlands. Through this Jewish Council the Nazis imposed their anti-Jewish measures. In spite of her initial objections, Etty took a job with the Jewish Council as a typist on July 15, 1942, at the Lijnbaansgracht (Amsterdam-Centre). Soon thereafter she applied for a transfer to the department ‘Social Welfare for People in Transit’ in Westerbork, where she arrived on July 30, 1942. Through her function with the Jewish Council she had a ‘privileged’ position in this transit camp, allowing her to travel back and forth to Amsterdam. Her first stays in Westerbork were only brief. During her second leave in Amsterdam, on September 15, 1942, Julius Spier, who suffered from lung cancer, died. Etty then proved too ill herself to go back to Westerbork. On November 20th of the same year she had recovered enough to return, but this time too she stayed only briefly.

On December 5<sup>th</sup> she was back in Amsterdam. In the same month she wrote her first extensive testimony (in a letter) about Westerbork. She stayed in the capital for half a year, to return to Westerbork on June 6, 1943. On July 5, 1943, employees of the Westerbork departments of the Jewish Council lost their special status; Etty was one of them. On July 10, 1943, she wrote to Maria Tuinzing, “This is the last letter I’ll be allowed to write for a while. This afternoon our identity cards were taken away, and we became official camp inmates.”

In Westerbork Etty wrote another extensive testimony in a letter about the transport of August 24, 1943. This testimony and the letter of December 1942 were illegally published at the end of 1943 by David Koning in the small book *Three Letters from the Painter Johannes Baptiste van der Pluym (1843-1912)*. Etty did not live to see its publication.



### **Publication and Reception of the Legacy**

For years Etty Hillesum's descriptions of Westerbork, republished in 1959, 1962 and 1978, were only known in a small circle of readers, but in the 1980s Etty Hillesum suddenly became a household name throughout Holland. In 1981 a selection of her diaries was published as *Het verstoorde leven* (published in English as *An Interrupted Life*). The book caused a sensation, and a stream of reprints and translations followed. On account of this great success a selection of her letters was published in 1982 as *Het denkende hart van de barak* (literally "The thinking heart of the barracks", published in English as *Letters from Westerbork*) and in 1984 the almost complete text of the sixth exercise book was published as *In duizend zoete armen* ("A Thousand Tender Arms Around You"). The Dutch publisher and theologian Jan-Geurt Gaarlandt had taken it upon himself to publish the material. However it had taken quite some time before the manuscript passed into his hands.

The publication of Etty Hillesum's writings was a protracted affair. In 1946 or 1947 former housemate Maria Tuinzing visited the writer Klaas Smelik (1897-1986), with whom Etty Hillesum had an affair in 1934. Tuinzing told Smelik that Hillesum had left him something: a diary in eleven exercise books and a bundle of letters. If she never were to come back, Hillesum told her housemate, she would like Tuinzing to hand over these documents to Smelik. He then should see to their publication. This was easier said than done. Smelik's daughter Johanna or "Jopie" (1916-2008), who had also been friends with Etty Hillesum, was the only one who could decipher Hillesum's nearly illegible hand. Smelik sent the transcription she made of part of the last exercise book to several publishing houses; not one showed any interest. The writings were considered 'too philosophical'. Klaas' son, Klaas Smelik, junior, who witnessed these efforts, commented, "These were the fifties: the war was not contemplated but commemorated. People wanted to read that the Germans were evil and the Dutch were good. People wanted to read about atrocities instead of an appeal not to hate one another." Etty Hillesum's manuscript did not meet this demand. It was probably not only 'too philosophical' but also 'too spiritual'. It wasn't until 1980 that Klaas Smelik,

junior found a publisher who was enthusiastic about the typed out text: Jan-Geurt Gaarlandt. He decided to publish a selection of Etty Hillesum's writings: *Het verstoorde leven (An Interrupted Life)*.

The Dutch public response to *Het verstoorde leven* was diverse, intense, and often polarized. For many readers the book was an extraordinary experience, it was a *bible de savoir vivre*; others repudiated and rejected Etty Hillesum's writings. She evoked strongly opposing views: she was as an "overgrown selfish schoolgirl" to some and a "saint" to others. What was striking was the focus on Etty Hillesum as a person and the unremitting tendency to judge her wartime behavior. These opinions were all based on the praiseworthy but extremely limited selection of *Het verstoorde leven*. This suggestive publication paved the way, for some readers, to a hagiographic conceptualization. Gaarlandt's introduction presented Etty Hillesum as a woman who on being summoned promptly went to Westerbork, who did not withdraw from the "fate" of the Jews (Etty Hillesum used the German word "Massenschicksal" or "common fate" in her diary) and who was a shining personality in Westerbork. While some commentators happily embraced this presentation, others devoted themselves to negate it. For example, the *éminence grise* of Dutch-Jewish critique, Henriëtte Boas (1911-2001), depicted Etty Hillesum as a selfish person who could hardly be identified as a real Jew. It was in some ways a tragicomic situation: multiple commentators claimed a monopoly on the truth of Hillesum's life and personality despite the fact that none of them had read all of her exercise books and letters. In response, Gaarlandt cleared the way for an unabridged, scholarly edition of Etty Hillesum's writings. In 1986 all of the available material, edited by Klaas Smelik, was published as *Etty: De nagelaten geschriften van Etty Hillesum 1941-1943 (Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943)*. Ten of the eleven exercise books that constitute the diary – written from March 9, 1941, to October 13, 1942 – were published. A seventh exercise book, written between April 30 and May 18, 1942, was lost. Apart from the diary nearly all retained letters were included in this edition.

### **An Introduction to Hillesum's Thought**

Not long before her final departure to Westerbork, Etty Hillesum wrote to Maria Tuinzing, "You ask for a diary. Because it's you, I'm leaving a silly piece of writing behind; there is a lot of rubbish in it, indiscreet woman!" Clearly then, Hillesum's diaries were first and foremost personal. She wrote them for herself, a fact often forgotten by commentators. Initially she addressed only herself. In her later, more religiously inspired writings she would also turn to a divine addressee. Her motives were also personal: to create order in her own mind and to master the art of writing. She longed to be a writer. Therefore her diary, apart from being a therapeutic "mud book", was a workbook for her future authorship. For both reasons she often called herself to order. Supposed lack of discipline or lavish language would lead to self-criticism, mixed with self-mockery: "And now that's enough fooling about, you useless thing. You squander most of your time and energy on brooding and thinking about things of absolutely no worth." Her exercise books are full of such admonitions. It is a form of interior monologue that is an inextricable part of such (self-)therapeutic diaries. Normally self-conversations like these do not end up (unless revised) in the hands of the general reader. On several occasions she thought about destroying her exercise books because of "that schoolgirlish nonsense", but always decided to retain them after all. She placed them in safekeeping, probably not only "as a means of getting in touch" with her old self later, but also as the basis for the writing of a Jewish chronicle "later on". In her diary Etty Hillesum increasingly expressed her wish to become a chronicler of Jewish life: "I hope I shall remember everything that happens to us so that one day I'll be able to retell it all." She increasingly saw herself as "the ears and eyes of a piece of Jewish history" and also believed that she had a task in Westerbork: "We must keep one another in touch with everything that happens in the various outposts of this world, each one contributing his own little piece of stone to the great mosaic that will take shape once the war is over."

Etty Hillesum never returned from Auschwitz. Still, through her writings her ideas and experiences during the war eventually passed into

the hands of the public. The multitude of long and short studies denotes, notwithstanding all criticism, the complex multiplicity of her legacy. Etty Hillesum's work can be approached from many perspectives and research angles. Her writings are both remarkably imaginative and an important historical-biographical document.

In 1989 the publisher Gaarlandt collected twenty-three reactions in a book, *"Ik zou een pleister op vele wonden willen zijn" – Reacties op de dagboeken en brieven van Etty Hillesum* ("I would like to act as a balm for many wounds" – Reactions to the diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum"). In his preface Gaarlandt wrote that it is "astonishing to read the number of aspects that can be uncovered about her life and writings. Literary, mystic, philosophical, historical, theological, psychological and therapeutic associations bring in material for miscellaneous articles. Kafka, Master Eckhart, Ruusbroec, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Rilke, Jung, Seneca, Carry van Bruggen, Bonhoeffer, people she is being compared to and linked with, the giants from the world of literature, philosophy and theology." The quantity of aspects that can be uncovered is "astonishing" indeed, and has resulted in a complicated reception. The authors of the compilation *Etty Hillesum in facetten* (2003) discussed twentieth century developments of this reception and explored the national and international reactions to the oeuvre.

The variegated reception of Etty Hillesum's legacy is perhaps the best proof that one can introduce her thought in many different ways. Her writings can be read from many angles, even by the same reader. Through the years, I myself have approached Etty Hillesum's writings from a variety of angles and research perspectives. For instance, I have studied her reading of Master Eckhart, her deliberately eclectic way of reading, her friendship with Henny Tideman, her descriptions of Westerbork, and a number of other subjects. With each new research perspective and way of reading her work, Etty Hillesum's legacy reopened itself, and another facet of her thinking became visible. Or, to quote Hillesum herself, "... at every twist of the road the whole vista changes all of a sudden". All these sights and vistas constitute the power of her legacy. Hillesum's writings are evidence of a great receptivity to cogitations

about human life and life itself. Part of this power must certainly be explained by the fact that Etty Hillesum wrote for herself alone and that her diary confronts the present-day reader with an uncensored adventure of the human mind. Unseen, like a voyeur, the reader can walk with Hillesum's thoughts and feelings: big and small, beautiful and not so beautiful, funny and not so funny. Her diary notes let the reader feel with her, clash with her, think with her, search with her, discover with her.

"Every pole has its opposite," Etty Hillesum wrote, and she assigned herself the task of not only knowing and thinking through opposites, but also *living* them. She found that she should not give way to the urge to unite life's opposites in a philosophical system: "(Life) cannot be captured in just a few formulas." She regularly reproached herself for wanting her brain to create a reductive, intellectual understanding of the world: "That is your disease: you want to capture life in formulas of your own. You want to embrace all aspects of life with your intellect instead of allowing yourself to be embraced by life." She wrote that such thoughts were "compulsive". Again and again she urged herself to give up all of her fixations in order to do justice to life – to life with all its differentiations. In that sense Etty Hillesum's mental system is a contrary way of thinking: she rejected a watertight system of truth, and was receptive to anything that presented itself in the unreasoned. Etty Hillesum tried to employ this receptivity to the unreasoned and the unexpected in her way of reading: "(...) one must approach a book in the same way as one approaches one's fellow men. Without preconceived ideas or demands. Sometimes one forms an image of the work after the first few pages and clings to that image, refusing to let it go – often doing violence to the author. Human beings must be granted their full freedom and so must books. Every expression used by a person or found in a book may cast a sudden and surprising new light, shattering our fixed ideas and the certainty into which they have lulled us."

In this book I have tried to adopt Etty Hillesum's receptive way of reading to approach her own writings. I have composed the book in such a way that it is possible to have a whole new vista "at every twist of the road". This made it necessary, when selecting the themes and quotations,

to have a wide range of the diverse and at times conflicting thoughts. I did not want to fill in her written legacy on the basis of one dominating idea, but to grant them their “full freedom” as much as I could. Thus, I selected twelve themes or angles that do justice to the multiplicity of her writings and visualize Hillesum’s typical changes of perspective. These twelve themes run analogously with twelve chapters, that each contain three sections. The chapter sequence is not arbitrary. By means of the first nine chapters I chronologically traverse Hillesum’s life, beginning with the chapter *Chaos*. After all, for Etty Hillesum chaos (in her parents’ home and beyond) was the reason to begin her diary. In the next three chapters (*Discipline, Writing, Reading*) I show how Etty Hillesum, after meeting Julius Spier, therapeutically disciplined herself, largely with writing and reading. The fifth and sixth chapters (*War and Resistance*) shed light on her thoughts about the war, the persecution of the Jews and her views on resistance, starting from the preceding developments. The seventh and eighth chapters (*Wisdom and God*) are about her perception of wisdom and the remarkable growth of her faith in God. The ninth chapter (*Testifying*) concentrates on her last stage of life in Westerbork and her testimonies. In the chapters *Body, Love and Life* I change perspective again and reinterpret her writings from other angles. The chapter *Body*: Etty Hillesum’s body, her female body, played an important role in her consciousness-raising process. Directly linked to that was her thinking about femininity and love. Those who think with Etty Hillesum, will think with her about love; not just about her “all-embracing love”, but also about her erotic cravings and inner struggles. One of her greatest loves was her love for life. Her account can be read as a personal expedition to explore “real life with all its nuances and elements of surprise”. That is why the last chapter is called *Life*. When Etty Hillesum wrote that she felt “the guardian of a precious slice of life”, she made an appeal to herself and to the reader to keep and pass on this same “precious slice of life”.



# I. CHAOS



## 1.

*That's the real tragedy of it. There is a small fortune here in talent and human worth, in both Father and Mother, but unused, or at least not put to good use. They wear you out with their unsolved problems and quickly changing moods; it's a chaotic and pitiful situation, which is reflected in the utterly disorganized household.*

8 August 1941

*Our house is a remarkable mixture of barbarism and culture. – Spiritual riches lie within grasp, but they are left unused and unguarded, are carelessly scattered about. It is depressing. It is tragicomic, I don't know what kind of crazy household this really is, but no human being can flourish here.*

8 August 1941

*It is sheer hell in this house. (...) Anyhow, I sprang from this chaos, and it is my task to pull myself out of it.*

13 August 1941

Etty Hillesum writes with love and humor about both her parents, but you cannot say she has nothing but positive memories of her childhood. She describes her parents' household as chaotic and sad. This is not a once-only observation, it is something she observes on a regular base and writes about in her exercise books. Whenever she visits her parents in Deventer she is overcome by the chaos that dominates the parental home. This dominance is no small thing for Etty Hillesum. It has affected both her life and the lives of her brothers Jaap and Mischa, and it is still affecting her. From a very early age she experienced chaos at all levels. Etty Hillesum feels that she "sprang" from her parents' chaos and decides to "pull herself out of it". But what was this chaos in the parental home really like?

The chaos in the Hillesum household must have been of a different caliber than the chaos in the average Dutch household in the 1940s. Louis (Levie) Hillesum is a Jewish intellectual, a classicist. Contemporaries describe him as a quiet, withdrawn man, a kind of scholarly recluse. The contrast could not be bigger with his wife Riva Hillesum-Bernstein, who is described as “busy, chaotic, extroverted and dominant”. She is of Russian-Jewish descent. At the age of twenty-five she ends up in Amsterdam after a pogrom. She meets Louis Hillesum, and they marry in 1912. When Etty is born on January 15, 1914, it is Riva Bernstein’s eighth year in Holland. The rest of the Bernstein family has by then moved from Amsterdam to the United States. Riva Hillesum-Bernstein has to live without her family. She is alone with her introverted Dutch husband. Nobody knows, though everybody suspects, that her flight to the Netherlands has been a turbulent and a traumatic one. When she is described as “busy, chaotic, extroverted and dominant”, no doubt her past has something to do with it.

Etty Hillesum observes that at the parental home there is “a small fortune in talent and human worth”, but that it is “unused, or at least not put to good use”. She herself links this to the “unsolved problems” and the “quickly changing moods” in the parental home. Although she sees her parents as very talented and imaginative, she also sees them as two people who have not been able to shape their lives, be it together or alone. That is the exact reason why they cannot pass on any form – let alone a religious form – to their children. They are unable to present their children with any well-defined world view. This is experienced by Etty Hillesum as a deficiency. The biggest philosophical message her parents gave to her was “a little bit of an ‘oy nebbich’ attitude to life” of her father, which to Etty Hillesum means more or less: it does not matter what you do, underneath the reality there is absolute chaos. It is this resigned philosophy of life, Etty Hillesum says, that casts a shadow over her childhood. To her this philosophy is tantamount to her parents’ powerlessness towards reality, which is expressed in the seeming indifference of her father’s pet saying, “oy nebbich” (Yiddish for “messy” or “shabby”). She feels threatened by that same powerlessness and chaos. She

sees it as her life's task to escape from this parental heritage: "And it is that very chaos that also threatens me, that I must make it my life's task to shake it off instead of reverting to it time and again."

## 2.

*Many people have fixed ideas, and so they bring their children up in rigid ways. The result is not enough freedom of action. With us it was precisely the other way round. I think my parents always were overwhelmed, and increasingly so, by the complexity of life, and that they have never been capable of making up their minds about anything. They gave us children too much freedom of action, and could not offer us any foothold because they never established a foothold for themselves. And the reason why they never were able to guide our steps was that they themselves had lost the way. And I see our own task more and more clearly: to allow their poor roving, unshaped and unsettled talents to grow and mature and take more solid shape in us, their children.*

*As a reaction to their shapelessness, in which there is no breadth, only slovenliness and uncertainty; bad management “so to speak”, perhaps at times, though less so of late, a compulsive search for unity, definition, a system. But the only true unity is that which embraces all the opposites and irrational elements, or else it is just another form of compulsion, of rigidity, and that violates life.*

22 December 1941

At first the non-conventional upbringing by her parents – the absence of a strict limit and structure – seems to be appreciated as an advantage by Etty Hillesum in the above diary note. After all, the people who have had a more rigid upbringing, like an orthodox Jewish or a Christian one, often “have fixed ideas”. And these fixed ideas are passed on to the next generation. Etty Hillesum finds that this gives them “not enough freedom of action”. Then she determines that with her parents it was precisely the other way round: they did not give her anything to cling to. However, she does not appreciate this opposite situation as an advantage. Where others were given *too little* freedom of action, she and her brothers had *too much* freedom of action. The Hillesum children swam around in shapelessness, they drowned in it, they felt no foothold whatsoever. And pass-

ing on this shapelessness is no well thought-out educational trick of her parents; it is based on the fact that they themselves are adrift and out of control. In the end Etty Hillesum understands them perfectly well. She can see that her parents are “overwhelmed by the complexity of life”; they have never been capable of making up their minds. Being without a foothold themselves they never could offer their children a foothold. Through their own shapelessness they “never” – it is a “never” that sounds very radical – were able to guide their children’s steps. Registering this incompetence does not lead Etty Hillesum to condemn her parents, but rather to pity them. For good reason she writes about their “poor roving, unshaped and unsettled talents” and that she as their child sees it as her task to let those talents grow, mature and take more solid shape in herself.

Against the actual chaos and shapelessness of her upbringing she increasingly longs for order and form. Etty Hillesum’s longing for “unity, definition, a system” is a longing to pull herself out of the squelchy marshes of her upbringing. Sometimes her own search for unity seems to be compulsive to her, but, she writes on December 22, 1941, “less so of late”. Actually, in her diary the nature of Hillesum’s longing for unity gradually changes. As we will see in the next chapter, palm reader Julius Spier’s therapeutic advices will take her in the spiritual-therapeutic water of self-realization and cosmic experience. “Become who you are!” is Spier’s maxim and Hillesum takes this phrase very seriously. At last there is someone who tells her what to do, who gives her a guidebook for her life! Initially the German Jew Spier is a charismatic father figure for Hillesum, someone who brings order to her life: who takes her “by the hand” and puts himself in charge of her “inner chaos”, of the “conflicting forces” inside her.

## 3.

*Then again, which is much worse, I get into one of those moods when nothing seems to make sense any longer. I lose my grip, my spirit is briefly occluded, and I sometimes get the feeling that I might get irredeemably mad and beclouded.*

*And then there are also those bad moments when my brain is being overworked, when my mind keeps searching for concise, comprehensive formulas for the many conflicts between body and soul, temporal and spiritual, finite and infinite – in short, to everything.*

9 September 1941

*I was again all chaos and confusion inside. A few hours of crisis and the kind of relapse I used to have during the worst times. It helps me, I suppose, to re-experience how bad things sometimes used to be. I crept into my bed in the middle of the day. The life of all humans had once more become a great tale of woe, and so on. Too much to put down on paper.*

30 November 1941

Etty Hillesum suspects that her attacks of chaos, confusion and senselessness are first of all part of the mental heritage of her mother's Russian family. She thinks these attacks are no superficial incidents; they spring from generations of deep-seated chaos. Generations of troubled minds. Not only her mother but Jaap and Mischa suffer from it too. Both her brothers are admitted in a psychiatric clinic a couple of times, and especially the musically gifted Mischa proves to be a problem child. He is even treated for schizophrenia. Etty Hillesum's fear of getting "irredeemably mad and beclouded" does not come out of the blue; this fear is very real to her for a very long time. In her brothers she recognizes the possibility that she too will "lose herself in chaos, in endless sadness". She wonders if her "strong craving for synthesis is an unconscious fear of suspected schizophrenia". Is it not her way to keep out the imminent chaos, the fear of mental disorder, of madness? Is it not the intensity of her

pursuit of unity and order inversely proportional to the power of the “bad moments” when her brain is being overworked in order to unite all contradictions of life in one “concise, comprehensive formula”?

In her fight against the “bad moments” mother Hillesum often plays the part of scapegoat. Most of the time her mother is her antagonist. According to her daughter Riva Hillesum-Bernstein is “a bundle of the most unlikely psychological complications”. She represents everything Etty Hillesum does not want to be: “Mother is a model of what I must never become.” It is her own fickleness, her own relapsing into what she sometimes calls her “Dark Ages” that she sees reflected in her mother’s enormous fickleness: “I always go in fear of becoming like my mother.” Etty Hillesum sees how her mother’s brief euphoric moments are alternated with long periods of feeling depressed, and she recognizes this pattern in her own life. We can see her fighting these fierce mood changes in her diary, reasoning and disciplining herself. She discovers that several of her moods are connected to her physical constitution, especially her menstrual cycle. Just before menstruation her “constitution feels completely changed” and a sense of unease and unrest gets a stronger hold over her. It is partly due to this discovery that she learns to put her moods into perspective.

Relapses and crises. They happen regularly. It is striking how Etty Hillesum will speak of a relapse (“Rückfall”) whenever she is staying over in Deventer. She thinks staying with her parents does not do her much good and she writes wryly, “Things here are going downhill. For that one week I managed to battle through so well, but now I’m beginning to feel so downhearted and oppressed, and it seems I’m unable to throw this mood off. In this family something seems always to be gnawing away at my vitality, and I’m sure I would turn into a crabbed old woman in the long run here and completely forget that I am really a most cheerful and communicative creature.” Cheerful and communicative: apparently these are qualities that have fuller play in her circle of friends in Amsterdam, away from the gravity of the home front.

## II. DISCIPLINE



## 4.

*I had done it now, me with my “blockage of the soul”. He would bring order to my inner chaos, harness the forces now at loggerheads within me. He took me metaphorically by the hand and said, “Look, that’s how you should live.” All my life I had had the feeling that, for all my apparent self-reliance, if someone came along, took me by the hand and bothered about me, I would be only too willing and eager to deliver myself up to his care. And there he was now, this complete stranger, this S. with his complicated face. And in just one week he worked wonders with me, almost in spite of myself. Gymnastics, breathing exercises, and illuminating, liberating words about my depression, my attitude to others, and the like. Suddenly I was living differently, more freely, “more flowingly”; the blocked feeling vanished, a little calm and order came into my life, at first entirely under the influence of his magical personality, but gradually backed up by my own psyche, of my own awareness.*

9 March 1941

The “he” who would bring order to Etty Hillesum’s inner chaos is Julius Spier. The German-Jewish Julius Spier – in the first half of his life a successful businessman – is a palm reader who also has had a psychoanalytical training with Carl Gustav Jung. In 1930 Spier establishes himself as a psycho-chirologist in Berlin. On emigrating to the Netherlands in 1939 he sets up shop again in Amsterdam; soon he has gathered a circle of pupils around him. On February 3, 1941, Etty Hillesum meets Spier. She is “object” in his course and gets her hands – her personality’s “second face” according to Spier’s theory – examined. As a result of this experience Etty Hillesum decides to undergo therapy from “this complete stranger, this S. with his complicated face”. Among other things he advises her to take physical exercises. On March 9, 1941, she writes in her diary, which she started that day, that Spier has worked wonders with her in just one week, that her “costive feeling” has vanished and that she feels “more flowingly” (“fließender”) and more calm.

Discipline. One of the most important tools against chaos appears to be discipline. Not the occasional exercise or a good conversation every now and then, but living to a strict timetable. Not that Hillesum is always successful in doing this: she often has to bring herself into line. But at times she is proud of having succeeded to live after Spier's rules: "Last night I really left the battlefield victorious. Washed all over in cold water, did a few exercises, applied a bit of mental self-discipline and regained much of my old clarity. I felt like shouting hip, hip, hooray, I've won." The first sensations of emotional liberation, calmness and space make a deep impression on Hillesum. She realizes that it is only a beginning, but it is a beginning all the same. She attributes these improvements to Spier's "magical personality" and knows she still needs the "backing" of her own psyche, of her own awareness.

For this backing of her psyche, this growing awareness, Spier's "illuminating, liberating words" are a welcome tool. Hillesum's diary is filled with Spier's remarks and advices in German. A simple sentence can be enough for Hillesum, such as: "One should never feel depressed about a depression." With these kind of remarks Spier helps Hillesum not to be too fixated on her feelings of despondency and meaninglessness. Spier's guidance is important, but even more important is Hillesum's disciplined self-activation, such as daily contemplation and keeping a diary. Daily contemplation brings about emotional self-confrontation, which can be reinforced by writing down daily thoughts and feelings: "yielding up so much that has been suppressed to a blank sheet of lined paper." Through writing things down, through the discipline of writing, Hillesum primes an unprecedented process within her.

## 5.

*But the prerequisite for my enormous program for life is probably to achieve a healthy physical as well as mental state. And physically the most important thing is certainly to get enough sleep, to take regular cold baths and to do exercises every morning. After that comes mental hygiene: scribbling away in this exercise book from time to time in order to take the fullest possible stock of all the many processes within oneself. And also, not thinking of one thing when you are busy doing another. To be so immersed in what you are doing that nothing else exists.*

29 September 1941

*I'm disgracefully disorganized. Perhaps that's the reason why I've been getting the feeling lately that I'm not doing enough, and that my schedule is too full as it is and there's no room for more.*

4 December 1941

The initial aim of the diaries is therapeutic. Hillesum writes for herself, to help herself forward. The “scribbling” in her notebook serves a therapeutic purpose. She wants to “take stock of all the many processes” within herself. It is all part of her daily discipline. Which does not mean that she is writing on a daily base from the first day onwards. In spring 1941 she does not write for at least six weeks (after a fanatical start), and in summer too she does not write for a whole month. It is not always easy for her to be continually occupied with herself and then write it all down. “I really must work much more regularly ‘on myself’, keep a careful watch on myself, but that is where the real trouble starts. I have the feeling now that I am a sort of psychological laboratory in which a large number of processes are taking place, enough for dozens of people. It would take all my time to commit all of these processes to paper.” The unremitting self-reflection by writing demands great concentration, and at times it is all too much for Hillesum. She then has a feeling that there are “a dozen incipient complexes” and that she does not know where to start. These are

the periods of “disgraceful disorganization”, the relapses when it is all too much, when she is overwhelmed by a feeling of her schedule being too full.

And indeed her program for life consists of quite a number of components. According to Hillesum physical hygiene comes before mental hygiene, “to get enough sleep, to take regular cold baths and to do exercises every morning”. She grumbles like no-one when she cannot manage it, but she can also shower herself with words of praise when she can. She can be very content with herself, for instance after a successful start of the morning: “I have clipped my toenails, drunk a mug of genuine Van Houten’s cocoa, and had some bread and honey, all with what you might call abandon.” And: “No more feeble excuses now, get on with it girl, you’ve got the reins in your hands so do not let go of them. You never get anything for nothing, not for a single minute. But you are back on the straight and narrow now. That tidied-up kitchen is a reflection of your tidied-up mind.”

These efforts to discipline herself on a permanent basis, to create order in her chaos, necessarily go hand in hand with continuous calls to order. She keeps falling back in restlessness and related moods, and Hillesum feels compelled to formulate her tasks aloud when writing them down. On October 12, 1941, she writes, “Perhaps it is my task in life, my sole task, to put some order and harmony into my own chaos.” One of her greatest desires is composure and concentration while working. Not having the urge to do everything at the same time. Hillesum complains that she is undisciplined while working. She then reproaches herself, saying that she should learn to do things one by one: “And also, not thinking of one thing when you are busy doing another. To be so immersed in what you are doing that nothing else exists.”

## 6.

*Not thinking, but listening to what is going on inside you. If you do that for a while every morning before you start work, you acquire a kind of composure that illumines the whole day. You really ought to begin each day like that, until the last shreds of worry and all petty thoughts have been swept out of your head. Just as you sweep your room clean of dust and cobwebs in the morning, so you ought also to clean yourself inwardly every morning. And only then should you start your work.*

10 June 1941

“And now that’s enough fooling about, you useless thing. You squander most of your time and energy on brooding and thinking about things of absolutely no worth.” Brooding, daydreaming, indulging in fantasies: these are things that Hillesum, in her own words, has a great talent for. She has a great talent for excessiveness, “swooning in great emotions” stands supreme. Such ecstatic moments often precede breakdowns, heavy attacks of despondency. These are the kind of mood changes that Etty Hillesum herself attributes to her Russian nature. She tries to discipline herself in this and often tells herself to stop these “bacchanalia of the spirit”. Easier said than done. There is always something to fantasize about. Like Julius Spier. Whole pages are dedicated to Spier; she reflects on her feelings for him. Is she or is she not in love with him? In what way does she love him? Yes, she loves him. But no, she cannot go on with him because he has a fiancée who is living in England. And he promised her to be faithful. But what about a brief pretend marriage to survive the war years together? After that she will surrender him unharmed to his fiancée. Or maybe that is not such a good idea after all? What to do? Etcetera. Hillesum tries to stop her fretting and fantasizing about this, which she sometimes refers to as “zerdenken”: thinking to pieces, destructive brooding. She wants to get rid of her talent to think herself straight into a tortured state: “Where is the boundary between “denken” and “zerdenken”, between thinking and destructive brooding?

You would do well to put a lot of energy into curing yourself of the second – it’s an unhealthy habit.” The most important remedy proves to be a form of meditation: “Not thinking, but listening to what is going on inside you.” “Hineinhören” is the German word Spier uses. Thus she encourages herself not to think but to listen to herself. Soon she discovers that this “inner listening” at the beginning of the day works wonders for her. It has a purifying effect. It calms her down.

Spier advises her to do this “inner listening”. He says it is a good thing, but this good thing requires regular exercises. At times, when Hillesum really suffers from “blockage of the soul” (“seelische Verstopfung”) and has made her brains work overtime, the road to her inner self is not so easy: she feels “barricaded” again. And she is full of self-mockery. On September 4, 1941, she writes, “‘Listen to your inner voice.’ Yes, indeed. So I withdrew to the farthest corner of my little room, sat on the floor, squeezed myself in between two walls, my head bowed. Yes. And sat there. Absolutely still, contemplating my navel so to speak, in the pious hope that new sources of inspiration would bubble up inside me. My heart was once again frozen and would not melt; every outlet was blocked and my brain squeezed by a large vice. And what I am waiting for whenever I sit huddled up like that is for something to melt, for something to start flowing inside me.” And sometimes the melting and flowing will not happen all at once; Hillesum’s outlets remain blocked, her brain squeezed. It is a matter of perseverance, of discipline.

The discipline of daily contemplation plays an important part in Hillesum’s program for life. Hillesum sometimes calls it her “Buddhist quarter of an hour”. She also uses a lot of German words: “hineinhören”, “hineinhorchen”, “Innenschau”, “sich versenken”, “stille Stunde”. They all mean the same: to look inside, to have a moment of silence. She adopts the depth-psychological vocabulary of Julius Spier and Carl Gustav Jung and interweaves it in her program of life. Hillesum implements the “Innenschau”, the looking in oneself, and discovers that she – obviously relapsing a lot – becomes more and more an “in sich ruhender Mensch”, a person at peace with herself.



III.  
WRITING



## 7.

*You see, the first lines in the new exercise book have now been written – there is always some inhibition about starting a new book; childish, really.*

16 February 1942

*It takes so much effort each time and it is such a personal struggle to make myself sit down in front of these narrow blue lines and to try to gently coax some thoughts out of myself – they still refuse to come meekly. Instead they jump about in my head sometimes, and elbow each other out of the way as if trying to get out from behind bars.*

27 February 1942

*This is my mud book.<sup>3</sup> A kind of garbage can for waste products from my whipped up emotions. No longer as whipped up as in the past, though. And when all the waste products have been disposed of, who knows but that I may achieve something positive on these faint blue lines.*

18 June 1942

Etty Hillesum's notebooks do not usually give the impression that she was bothered by inhibitions while writing in her diary. Rather the reverse: she writes down things many of her contemporaries would not easily commit to paper. But in fact on the first page she compares her inhibitions as a writer to sexual inhibitions: "So many inhibitions, so much fear of letting go, of allowing things to pour out of me, and yet that is what I must do if I am ever to give my life a reasonable and satisfactory pur-

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<sup>3</sup> "Mud book" is the literal translation of "modderschrift": *modder* meaning "mud" and *schrift* "notebook" or "exercise book". However *schrift* can also be interpreted as short for *handschrift* or "handwriting", in which case Hillesum's word – which is of her own making – can also be interpreted as "sloppy hand(writing)", which is what the English translator of Etty Hillesum's collected writings must have done. In *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, translated by Arnold J. Pomerans, Hillesum's "Dit is m'n modderschrift" ("This is my mud book") became "This is no more than a scrawl". I think that the next sentence in the diary proves that this is a misinterpretation. (Translator's note)

pose. It is like the final, liberating scream that always sticks bashfully in your throat when you make love.” She then compares the fact that she is intellectually blessed to the fact that she is erotically seasoned, and concludes that deep inside there is something, “a tightly wound ball of twine”, that she can only set free by openly writing down all of her feelings and thoughts. To be liberated she must write, like surrender precedes orgasm.

In a sense her inhibited mind is compensated by surrender: “yielding up so much that has been suppressed to a blank sheet of lined paper.” It is like overcoming a sense of shame, which sometimes requires more strength and self-conquest than would appear from her writings. Bringing thoughts out “in a few intelligible words” proves to be not that easy; it cannot always be accomplished satisfactorily. Jumping thoughts sometimes “elbow each other out of the way as if trying to get out from behind bars”. Or, in Hillesum’s words on the first page of her first notebook: “The thoughts in my head are sometimes so clear and so sharp and my feelings so deep, but writing about them comes hard.” So initially writing about her thoughts and feelings comes as a chore for Etty Hillesum. And the result does not always satisfy her. However, she quickly discovers the chastening effect of writing: “What a strange thing to happen: now that I have started writing, ‘I just can’t stop’. The ‘spiritual blockage’ is beginning to get less ‘blocked’.” She discovers that writing can heal her feeling of being a “garbage can”. By finding words for her thoughts she can dispose of “the waste products” of her confused mind. By writing she transports her thoughts and feelings to her exercise book, which becomes “a kind of garbage can”. And she hopes that, “when the waste products have been disposed of”, she “may achieve something positive on these faint blue lines”.

## 8.

*Other girls had visions of husbands and children, but I used to have visions of a hand that was busy writing.*

3 October 1941

*How do I feel now? I can only find distorted images to describe it. Later I shall no doubt find the right brush strokes, later when I really get down to writing.*

17 March 1942

By actually keeping a diary Etty Hillesum is confronted with an old desire, a vision from her youth: “Other girls had visions of husbands and children, but I used to have visions of a hand that was busy writing.” Yes, writing, that is it. She would like to be a genuine writer. But can she? She can be full of self-mockery about her writing talents: “Snatches of prose, upright and almost fully fledged, march through my head at times, though heaven only knows where they are going.” Or: “I no longer want to be this century’s most famous writer. All I want is to find a few little words now and then to accommodate my gathering feelings.” But she does not always succeed in finding those few “little words” for “gathering feelings”. Hillesum persists in her self-criticism. Often she is annoyed by her way of writing. She would like to write down exactly what she thinks and feels, but she often fails to do so: “Ugh, why can’t I write? Yes, one day, ‘when I am a big girl,’ I shall be able to.” Or she is annoyed by her exaggerated way of expressing herself, by her “distorted images”: “I shall have to sweat blood to rid my style of all that pathos if I am ever to make anything of it, but really it’s all a matter of looking for the right words.”

Her diary is not just an important therapeutic tool for Etty Hillesum; very soon it also becomes an exercise book for her as a writer. By constantly formulating thoughts and feelings she trains herself in finding “the right brush strokes”. And indeed, that is not easy: “I have a thousand

things to write, but can safely omit 999 of them.” By the end of 1941 she sighs, “In fact that is my only problem: how to express myself. To find my own form.” Her pathetic phrasing, the “distorted images” frustrate her. Why does she always have to exaggerate? When, in the summer of 1941, she complains to Spier that she still does not have the tools needed to express herself, he drily remarks, “Nor do you have anything to express.” According to Spier, Etty Hillesum does not have a “theme” (“Gegenstand”), a subject to write about. Hillesum agrees. In effect, she concludes, she is still in the preparatory phase of her authorship: the stage of observing. She must sharpen her talent for observation by practicing what she calls, in German: “hineinhorchen”, attentively hearkening to herself, to others, to the world. Rilke, her tutor in writing, taught her that attentive observation of the things around her is indispensable for practicing her authorship. Creative processes cannot be forced; they demand patience.

## 9.

*What I must strive to capture if I ever want to “write” is the small everyday detail, the individual gesture. I keep going on about “life”, “suffering”, “the” person.*

23 November 1941

*I must learn to gather up all the patience that is in me, gather together all the fragments of patience into one great patience. And perhaps, perhaps, much later – I may then be able to write.*

4 April 1942

Patience. Observation. A sense of everyday details. These are things that Ety Hillesum wants to practice and develop for her authorship. Rainer Maria Rilke is her most important source of inspiration in that field. “Patience is all!” she copies from his *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*, his *Letter to a Young Poet*. In this book she finds her “whole program for life”: “It contains words that ought really to stay with you for good.” She especially means words and words of advice concerning the creative process and authorship, concerning what she calls Art “with the biggest capital A”. In Rilke she reads that she should let her impressions grow within her until they are ready to be born. She also reads that it is not just a matter of patience but also of humility. Things that are stored “in the dark, in the ineffable, the unconscious, in what is beyond the grasp of reason” need time to germinate, to grow and to come to perfection. With patience and humility we must “await the hour of birth of a new clarity”. She finds it all in a fragment she copies several times: “*Everything* is bearing and then giving birth. Allowing every impression and every germ of a feeling to reach perfection deep within us, in the dark, in the ineffable, in the unconscious, in what is beyond the grasp of reason, and to await the hour of birth of a new clarity with deep humility and patience, only thus can you live artistically – in understanding no less than in art.” You cannot force the artist within you. Artistic creative processes are like organic process-

es: germination, growth, birth. If you want to have a complete product too soon and moreover strive for fame, you will not undergo the joy of this creative process. Reading Rilke makes it soon clear to Hillesum that she will have to abandon her desire to become “this century’s most famous writer”. This wish has got nothing to do with being an artist and everything with ambition.

Using everyday tangible details as a theme: that is Rilke’s lesson for Hillesum. Not “life”, “suffering”, “the” person, but everyday tangible details as a starting point of writing. It is all about observation and registration of small things in our direct environment: gestures, a gaze, events. The art of writing is preceded by the art of observation. Then, à la Rilke, internalization and patience will come. Hillesum practices this art. And she proves to have a talent for it; her writing gets better and better. Slowly but surely her theme changes too. Initially she had been focusing on her own person and on the disentangling of her troubled mind, but in later exercise books and letters she focuses far more on her surroundings. When she begins her diary, the war seems to be far away; it is an almost unreal presence. But as her writing is developing the war closes in and Hillesum feels more and more part of Jewish history. Her writing theme announces itself peremptorily: the fortunes of the Jewish people, *her* people. She witnesses the events around her and knows she wants to be a chronicler, that she wants to attest to the events around her. As the ring closes around her and the situation gets more menacing, her writing takes on the character of a testimony. The urge to write is now coming from another source. It is no longer her own personal story that matters, but the story of the all too real events around her. Instead of just being a writer, she wants to be a chronicler.



IV.  
READING



## 10.

*All this devouring of books from early youth has been nothing but laziness on my part. I allow others to formulate what I ought to be formulating myself. I keep seeking outside for confirmation of what is hidden deep inside me, when I know that I can only reach clarity by using my own words.*

4 August 1941

*I am a late developer, really. I have been reading books since I was twelve, but no doubt too passively. Have far too often gone on reading to the point of stupefaction. Everything too formless and indistinct. Submerged and sunk and lost and dreamy.*

*It was that oh-well-reading. The feeling that I could have put it just as well myself, the feeling of knowing it all.*

*Only now, when I am 27, have I started to read more purposefully, I might say more independently of whatever it is I happen to be reading. And for me the writers' characters are beginning to emerge that much more sharply defined.*

12 December 1941

From the age of twelve onward Etty Hillesum devours the classics of world literature. Books have always been available to her. At home, with her parents, she could draw from her father's library. Later, during the war years in Amsterdam, she has the disposal of Spier's predominantly German library. Since his own living quarters are too small Spier's books have been taken to Han Wegerif's big house. Hillesum is pleased: "More than one thousand books. Every day there will be another figure who will give me this dreamy, unreal feeling. I live with books. They color the atmosphere around me. A name or a few pages can rule my whole day." It does sound a bit ecstatic, or "schwärmerisch" as Hillesum would say in German. All the same it is true: she does indeed live with books. Books are her "second fatherland"; as little as "a name or a few pages" can sat-

isfy her hunger for wisdom. Hillesum is continually longing for meaningful words and sentences. She is a glutton of words, and can find satisfaction in just a fragment from a text. She does not have to finish a book to feel happy; a good and well-chosen passage can be enough. Han Wegerif finds it somewhat annoying that only a sentence or a few pages can do for Hillesum. He criticizes the way she reads as being “too much”, “too superficially”, and says that she does not have the right attitude to books. In a way this is in keeping with what she says about her “oh-well-reading”.

Even though Hillesum sees her “oh-well-reading” more or less as a youthful habit of hers, it remains a guiding principle in her approach to books. Recognition and confirmation remain important indicators in her selection. In the war years she chooses her authors more consciously and actively. She compiles her own personal canon: “the writers’ characters are beginning to emerge that much more sharply defined.” Not just recognition and confirmation but deliverance and liberation play a crucial part. Hillesum now consciously pursues her aim: she wants to achieve liberating wisdom, words that will forever keep their meaning. Through texts she is looking for words that provide her with inner freedom, that make her strong and resilient. In that context she regularly quotes Will Durant: “Knowledge is power, but wisdom alone is freedom.” In her search for liberating wisdom she reads all kinds of texts, copying the fragments that are meaningful to her. Reading is increasingly a matter of copying, rereading, internalizing. Her seemingly superficial way of reading is counterbalanced by the intensity with which she absorbs some of the texts: soaking up and ruminating she feeds herself with fragments. Other people’s words and thoughts become *her* words and thoughts, become the linguistic guidelines of her existence.

## 11.

*What I am looking for, of course, is my own truth, but I still have no idea what it will look like. I go blindly after a certain objective, I can feel there is an objective, but where and how I do not know. My method of studying is strange as well. I make extracts from books almost instinctively, I sometimes hang on to a single sentence, a single word – I feel that I must preserve it for the future, that it will prove useful later on.*

23 August 1941

*And so life is a passage from one deliverance to the next. And I may often have to seek my deliverance in bad pieces of prose, just as a man in extremis may seek it in what is aptly called a 'tart', because sometimes one cries out for deliverance, no matter how.*

17 December 1941

*So far all my reading has been nothing but a constant recognition of familiar moments. And that is how you try to piece your own picture together from literature. Capturing it as in a thousand shards of a mirror.*

20 December 1941

According to Hillesum even “bad pieces of prose” can offer deliverance. In the beginning of her diary she uses sexual imagery to explain the liberating power of writing; she does the same to explain the liberating power of reading: just as “a man in extremis” may seek deliverance “in what is aptly called a ‘tart’”, she may often have to seek deliverance in bad pieces of prose. Temporary deliverance. Eventually Hillesum wants to piece together her “own picture”, her own ultimately liberating world view. By reading she wants to capture it “as in a thousand shards of a mirror”. That is probably why her diary looks like a mosaic in which the discovered shards function like small shelters for her mind. Hillesum is receptive to the most diverse range of thoughts and collects her shards from all kinds of sources and traditions. French philosopher Hélène

Cixous once compared such deliberate eclecticism to the behavior of a *voleuse*, the French word for a female thief. Cixous looks at her *voleuse* as a woman who, being an outsider in the dominant cultural legacy, can only relate to this legacy as an intruder, a thief. She descends from the air (the second meaning of the verb *voler*, to steal, is to fly) and picks the words that help her form a world view.<sup>4</sup> Hillesum's eclecticism can easily be explained by her background. Since she had a nonreligious upbringing she finds herself outside religious traditions. She is Jewish but stands apart from orthodox Jewish tradition or any other religious tradition in the Netherlands. From the outside the Hillesum family seems to be integrated in Dutch culture, to be assimilated, but in fact mother Hillesum still is an exile of sorts. Etty Hillesum is the daughter of a Russian-Jewish woman who was persecuted because of her identity and could not live in her homeland. Though having the Dutch nationality Etty Hillesum looks at herself as being Jewish and Russian. She wants to make herself familiar with the Russian language and culture, but at the same time she feels alienated from this culture. Philosophically she finds herself in a no man's land. Because of the way she was brought up – “without a foothold”, as argued in this book's first chapter – this philosophical no man's land is experienced as chaos, as a sloppy and shapeless life. Father Hillesum may have a philosophical outlook on life that is as sincere as it is keen-witted but it is also “totally vague”. For Etty Hillesum there is only one way out of this vagueness: finding a “crystallizing thought”, a “redeeming formula”.

As far as Etty Hillesum is concerned, reading is not about systematically acquiring knowledge by reading books from cover to cover, but about filling and shaping the philosophical vacuum she is in. Indeed, she is “flying” like a *voleuse* over and through texts to get hold of a nicely composed booty of genuine words: “What I am looking for, of course, is my own truth, but I still have no idea what it will look like. I go blindly after a certain objective, I can feel there is an objective, but where and

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<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Hélène Cixous, ‘Conversations’ in: Susan Sellers (ed.), *Writing differences. Readings from the seminar of Helene Cixous*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988, 141-154.

how I do not know. My method of studying is strange as well. I make extracts from books almost instinctively; I sometimes hang on to a single sentence, a single word – I feel that I must preserve it for the future, that it will prove useful later on.” She is preserving words for future use, words that will remain meaningful “no matter what the circumstances” and that she can fall back on. Her need for meaningful words will increase as the war continues and the menace intensifies.

## 12.

*And that is probably the only right way with literature, with study, with people, or with anything else: to let it all soak in, to let it mature slowly inside you until it has become a part of yourself. That, too, is a growing process. Everything is a growing process.*

1 April 1942

There can be no mistake about it: for Etty Hillesum reading is a particularly serious business. It is not just taking in a couple of words; it is taking in words as if they were food, absorbing them. When you let words soak in and mature inside you, you will find that these words will later become part of you. Hillesum especially applies this intensive way of reading to texts by her favorite writer Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke, she says, gives her “the loveliest words”, words that keep their meaning no matter what the circumstances: “*Durch alle Wesen reicht der eine Raum: Weltinnenraum.*” As usual she does not translate these German words. Rilke translations – in this case: “Through every being single space extends: world inner space”<sup>5</sup> – are not to Hillesum’s liking; to her many German words and expressions are untranslatable. German is almost like a second language to her, as the great number of German quotations in her diary proves. These quotations are not copied only from books; they are also extracted from her conversations with Spier.

In the early 1940s Etty Hillesum develops a more distinct personal canon, a list of favorite authors and books. Apart from works from Russian authors (Dostoyevsky, Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy) and works about the “Russian soul” (Christian Schubart’s *Europa und die Seele des Ostens* – Europe and the Eastern Soul) Hillesum likes to read Rainer Maria Rilke most of all. But she also likes to read Carl Gustav Jung’s depth-psychological works. To a lesser extent she reads Freud and Adler. Al-

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<sup>5</sup> Pomerans’ translation of Weltinnenraum is “outer space within”. (Translators’s note)

most in passing she mentions philosophical classics like Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. However she is not really interested in philosophical systems, but rather in texts that are characterized by wisdom. She profoundly enjoys *The Mansions of Philosophy*, a work by the afore mentioned American philosopher Will Durant: “Then in the evening, I really enjoyed Durant’s wonderful book.” It is this bulky book that she mentions several times in the beginning and from which she copies her central quote about wisdom: “Knowledge is power, but wisdom alone is freedom.”

As Hillesum’s process of awakening continues, she reads more and more religious literature, like Augustine and the Bible books. Increasingly she quotes from the Bible, both from the Old and the New Testament. The creation of her canon is partly inspired by the context of the Spier circle, which can be seen as a spiritual enclave where they read not only Thomas à Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ* but also apocryphal texts like *The Gospel of the Holy Twelve*. Even though Hillesum is absorbed by her own world of thoughts, the religious attitude of the charismatic Julius Spier and that of the pious Henny Tideman (then member of the Oxford Movement) have an influence on Hillesum’s own philosophical development and the literature she chooses. It is impossible to give a list which does justice to Hillesum’s reading, but remarkable is her preference for writers such as Walter Rathenau (*Letters to a Woman in Love*) and Friedrich Rittelmeyer (*Letters about the Gospel of John*). Texts from these authors are also in the book of quotations that Henny Tideman and Ety Hillesum keep in 1942. In this little book, called *Levenskunst – Gedachten van week tot week* (“Savoir-Vivre – Thoughts from Week to Week”), compiled by A.J.C. van Seters, we can read what quotations Hillesum and Tideman write down each week for themselves and each other. While Tideman often writes down remarks by their mentor Spier, which makes her collection a bit monotonous, Hillesum’s quotations are a lot more varied. Apart from texts by widely known authors that we already know from her diary (Rilke, Jung, the Russian authors, Bible texts, Thomas a Kempis, Rathenau, Rittelmeyer, Schubart, but also Dutch authors like Frederik van Eeden, Simon Vestdijk and Albert Verweij) Hil-

lesum quotes texts by authors that are not mentioned explicitly in her exercise books. The eye is caught by a number of quotations that Hillesum attributes to “De Kluizenaar”, The Hermit. That is all. Closer investigation revealed that *De Kluizenaar* was a bestseller by the Swedish author Ebba Pauli (1873-1941). Another conspicuous reference is “C.J. Schuurman”. This is the Dutch psychiatrist Kees Schuurman (1898-1979) who in 1941 had published a book, *Perspectief der ziel. Weet ik werkelijk waarvoor ik leef?* (“Perspective of the Soul – Do I Know What I Live for?”). His exposé and choice of words – self-awareness, living process, inner world, outer world, the self, to be at one with the universe – fit in perfectly with Hillesum’s spiritual-therapeutic development in this period.





V.  
WAR

## 13.

*More arrests, more terror, concentration camps, the arbitrary dragging off of fathers, sisters, brothers. We seek the meaning of life, wondering whether any meaning can be left. But that is something each one of us must settle with himself and with God. And perhaps life has its own meaning, even if it takes a lifetime to find it. As of now I feel totally disconnected with things and life; I have the feeling that everything is accidental, that one must break one's inner bonds with people and stand aside for all else. Everything seems so menacing and ominous, and always that feeling of total impotence.*

14 June 1941

In her first diary notes the war seems far away, an almost unreal presence. There seems to be a glass wall between Etty Hillesum and the events that surround her. Hillesum concentrates on her own psychological problems, on finding ways of dealing with them, and on the enclave of friends and housemates around her. The rest of the world seems to be on hold. At times she even seems to be rather indifferent about the war. By the end of 1941 she asks herself the question why she is hardly affected by it. Her own answer is quite remarkable: "Perhaps because it is my second great war? I experienced the first one, with fierce intensity, through the postwar literature. So much rebelliousness, so much hatred, the passion, the arguments, the call for social justice, the class struggle, etc.; we have been through it all. To go through it a second time just will not do – it becomes like a cliché. It's happening all over again: every country praying for its own justified victory, the same old slogans, but it is all too ridiculous and too insipid to be bothered or fly into a passion about it." A cliché, ridiculous, insipid. No, Hillesum has left it all behind her; she is fed up with it. When the twenty-one-year-old Hans Wegerif, Han Wegerif's son, claims that politics is the most important thing in life, Hillesum finds that outmoded and sighs: "Between his twenty-one and my twenty-seven years lies a whole generation." The entire fragment is

clearly prompted by irritation, by a discussion she is had with Hans Wegerif. In itself the fragment shows that Hillesum, in spite of her often propagated left-wing ideas in the thirties, does not think in political terms. Even so she does think about the ominous situation around her.

The war gradually creeps into Hillesum's diary through the holes and cracks of her text. The danger certainly is perceived from the start: "More arrests, more terror, concentration camps, the arbitrary dragging off of fathers, sisters, brothers. We seek the meaning of life, wondering whether any meaning can be left." Hillesum herself sees a connection between the war and her attacks of meaninglessness, the feeling that she is "totally disconnected with things and life", that everything is "accidental". Her feelings of chaos and darkness are also related to the war and the history of violence and persecution in her own life. Not only was she born in the year when the First World War broke out; she also has a mother who, being a Russian Jewess, was driven away, chased out of her country. Etty Hillesum is a refugee's daughter, the daughter of a Jewish woman who lives in exile. Etty Hillesum was not born in a time of peace but in a time of war. Long before the Second World War she feels her "primitive instinct as a Jew threatened with destruction". And indeed when the Second World War finally breaks out, in her own way she has had her share of war already. Her aversion towards thinking about war in political terms is connected, among other things, with her notion that the roots of evil and hatred cannot be sufficiently addressed by political thoughts and actions.

Hillesum's attitude towards the menace of the war passes through several stages, during which feelings of fear and impotence certainly play their part: "Everything seems so menacing and ominous, and always that feeling of total impotence." She feels she has to find a defense against an evil which essentially leaves her helpless. She suspects that she will have to "break her inner bonds with people and stand aside for all else". Breaking bonds, letting go, standing aside, parting: these are words that make her feel strong. By writing and reading she develops her own spiritual vocabulary in which she can retain a world filled with love for life, even if everything would be taken from her. Meanwhile the menace is

getting closer and closer: “From all sides our destruction creeps upon us, and soon the ring will be closed and no one at all will be able to come to our aid. All the little loopholes that are still left will soon be stopped up.”

## 14.

*All disasters stem from us. Why is there a war? Perhaps because now and then I might be inclined to snap at my neighbor. Because I and my neighbor and everyone else do not have enough love. Yet we could fight war and all its excrescences by releasing, each day, the love that is shackled inside us and giving it a chance to live. And I believe that I will never be able to hate any human being for his so-called wickedness, that I shall only hate the evil that is within me, though hate is perhaps putting it too strongly even then. In any case, we cannot be lax enough in what we demand of others and strict enough in what we demand of ourselves. And I believe that the reason why I am not frightened at times like these is because everything that happens is so close to me, because it originates – no matter what monstrous dimensions it may sometimes assume – from humankind, and thus time and again it is reduced to human dimensions.*

28 March 1942

Whenever war is the theme of Hillesum's reflections, she formulates her thoughts in psychological rather than political terms. She feels that the source of global disasters can be reduced to human dimensions, to the persons we are and the way we relate to each other. "Why is there a war? Perhaps because now and then I might be inclined to snap at my neighbor. Because I and my neighbor and everyone else do not have enough love." According to Etty Hillesum there is only one remedy to fight "war and all its excrescences": working on oneself. Regularly she writes that it is no luxury "to work on oneself". In her eyes it is not "morbid individualism". If all people would work on themselves, for instance by a daily moment of turning inward, then much more love would be awakened in people and there would be more space for one's neighbor. Thus Hillesum's remedy against war can be summarized with the famous quote

“Be the change you want to see in the world”.<sup>6</sup> She is convinced that the peace that will come can only be true peace “when every individual finds peace within himself, when we have all vanquished and transformed our hatred for our fellow human beings of whatever race – even into love one day”. A true transition from war to peace on a global scale requires that it should go hand in hand with an all-out transition from hate to love on an individual level.

In the middle of the war Etty Hillesum develops a utopian and pacifist way of thinking that makes an appeal on the commitment of each and every individual. Those who cannot help themselves possibly can be helped by others. Typical of this is Hillesum’s confrontation with a young Gestapo officer who was shouting at her and “the helpless Jews”. In her diary she writes that she felt no fear for the young man but rather sincere compassion. She describes his “harassed and driven” face; a face though that at the same time was “sullen and weak”. Then she writes, “I should have liked to start treating him there and then.” This – in her eyes – harassed individual triggers her therapeutic inclinations. Yes, she would be able to help this boy. She observes that she is always aware that she is dealing with human beings, that she will always try as hard as she can “to understand everything that anyone ever does”. In the case of the young Gestapo officer though she adds that “young men like that” are pitiable only if they cannot do any harm, but that they “are dangerous and should be destroyed as soon as they are let loose on mankind.”<sup>7</sup> But all the blame must be put on the system that uses such people.” So there is a limit to Hillesum’s pacifism. People who are a danger to mankind should be eliminated. However this is not what she advocates among her friends. At times she seems to irritate the people around her with her all too pacifist ideas.

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<sup>6</sup> The author, Ria van den Brandt, actually cites a nationally famous Dutch variation of this Mahatma Gandhi quote by the Roman Catholic activist and priest Father de Greeve: “Verbeter de wereld, begin bij jezelf” (if you want to change the world, start with yourself). (Translator’s note)

<sup>7</sup> In *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943* the translator, Pomerans, left the passage about destruction out. Instead he added a sentence which does not originate from the diary: “What needs eradicating is the evil in man, not man himself.” (Translator’s note)

In the different stages that Etty Hillesum goes through, her feelings of fear never get the upper hand, at least not in her writings. There are certainly moments when she is very worried and restless, but on the whole she seems to become increasingly balanced and calm. In the war that is raging around her, “no matter what monstrous dimensions it may sometimes assume”, she always acknowledges its human source and dimensions. When asked if, after the latest promulgations, she did not agree “that they should be done away with, preferably hung, drawn, and quartered” she writes, “That would satisfy our personal bitterness and vengeful feelings, but why take the cheapest and easiest way? Why only think of satisfying one’s own ego? For that is what it really comes down to when all is said and done. Then those who come after us will be no further ahead and will have to start all over again, so why not take just one little step forward ourselves? Not just in theory but through daily practice. For instance, my sudden irritation and aggressiveness towards Käthe when I feel that deep down she is defending her country or rather, the good there is in her country, for, after all, those who live there are people like ourselves. Surely that is right? You can spin as many theories as you like, but they are people like ourselves. That is something we must cling to through thick and thin, and shout into the face of all that hatred.”



## 15.

*They are out to destroy us completely; we must accept that and go on from there. Today I was filled with terrible despair, and I shall have to come to terms with that as well.*

3 July 1942

*The streets through which we cycle are not what they used to be; the sky hangs so low and so threatening over them, and there seem to be storm signals even when the sun is shining. We now live side by side with destiny, or whatever you want to call it; we rub shoulders with it daily, and nothing is how we learned it from our books.*

7 July 1942

*My biggest worry is what to do with my useless feet. I also hope my bladder will be fixed in time, or else I'm bound to be a nuisance when we are all herded together. And I must go to the dentist soon – so many essentials that I have put off endlessly but are now, I think, urgent.*

7 July 1942

*Tonight I dreamed that I had to pack my case. I tossed and turned, fretting about what shoes to take – all of them hurt my feet.*

7 July 1942

Etty Hillesum says many different things about the war and the way she relates to it. In the Hillesum literature her spiritual resignation is often emphasized, and either applauded or condemned. I will deal with this attitude in the next chapter, the one about resistance. The resignation Hillesum develops contrasts with the threat of persecution and destruction around her, which she experiences as a concrete threat to herself and describes thus: “They are out to destroy us completely.” *Us* completely: not the destruction of the Dutch in general but of the Jews among them. Her “primitive instinct as a Jew threatened with destruction” is borne out by the way the war is developing. She feels how the Jewish part of the pop-

ulation is being driven into a corner, how “from all sides our destruction creeps up on us, and soon the ring will be closed”. Some commentators see her as unworldly and naïve, but she is aware of the “Massenschicksal”, of the Jews’ “common fate”. That does not mean that she is completely aware of what is happening to the Jews in the concentration camps, but she is certain of one thing: that the Nazis do not mean well by the Jews. However she does not approve of the stories of disaster that the Jews are telling one another: “What’s the point?” All the same Etty Hillesum is very worried. These are worries that often contrast her vocabulary about this “wonderful and meaningful life”. For instance: “I had the feeling that I was resting against the naked breast of life, and could feel her gentle and regular heartbeat. I felt safe and protected. And I thought, Is it not strange? It is wartime. There are concentration camps. Small barbarity mounts upon small barbarity. [...] And yet — at unguarded moments, when left to myself, I suddenly lie against the naked breast of life, and her arms round me are so gentle and so protective, and my own heartbeat is difficult to describe: so slow and so regular and so soft, almost muffled, but so constant, as if it would never stop, and so good and merciful as well.” For Hillesum this peaceful frame of mind is vital to hold on to. She wants to believe that this cannot be altered by the war and its senseless barbarity. With such passages the war is kept at a distance, at least rhetorically. In reality it is closing in.

In the summer of 1942, Etty Hillesum is overwhelmed by a new series of anti-Jewish measures, feeling nervous and hunted. Suddenly the threat of being deported is getting closer. She is worried about her physical condition. She gets nervous when she thinks of her small “handicaps”: her feet are useless, her bladder needs “fixing”, she will have to have “lots and lots of holes in my teeth filled” and god knows what else. She will have to attend to that, otherwise she is “bound to be a nuisance” when they are all “herded together”. She cannot imagine that she will survive the “labor camps” (sic) for a very long time. With her feeble body, usually plagued by all kinds of ailments, she thinks she will die within three days. Therefore she must see to it that she is more or less recovered when she is rounded up and taken to a camp. At times she

dreams about this moment: about leaving, about packing her case, worrying over her feet.

Equally striking are her worries over Julius Spier, whose health is quickly deteriorating. Her early decision to share the fate of the Jewish people runs analogously with her decision to follow Julius Spier when he would receive his call-up notice: "...something inside me has suddenly changed, and I know now that I shall follow S. wherever he goes and share his sorrows." She even develops plans for a pretend marriage. However it works out differently. Julius Spier gets terminally ill and the threat of a call-up notice makes Hillesum increasingly nervous. On July 24, 1942, she writes, "When worries started to assail me again early this morning, I simply jumped out of bed. 'God, take them away from me, please.' I do not know what I shall do if they send for him, what influence I can use on his behalf." But by the end of that summer Spier dies. He narrowly escapes a call-up notice and Etty Hillesum is glad that he is now released from his suffering. For her however the war is far from over.

## VI. RESISTANCE

## 16.

*Many accuse me of indifference and passivity when I refuse to go into hiding; they say that I have given up. They say everyone who can must try to stay out of their clutches; it's our bounden duty to try. I should make an effort. But that argument is specious. At the moment everyone makes an effort, tries to save himself; nevertheless some, even many will have to go. And the funny thing is, I don't feel I'm in their clutches.*

11 July 1942<sup>8</sup>

The accusations of passivity, of defenseless surrender to the enemy, are not only made in Hillesum's lifetime. After her death, when her legacy is published, many readers – Jews and non-Jews – are annoyed by her passive attitude and even hurt by some of her texts. After all, some of her writings, including the above passage, seem to denounce hiding, fleeing. Moreover the way she is initially mythologized – Etty as a near saint and martyr who wittingly chooses to die – paves the way to biased interpretations of her alleged passivity and compliance. It is true, she writes that as a Jewess she wants to share the fate of her people, but that is not the same as choosing to die. Nor is it the same as denouncing people who try to go into hiding. Etty Hillesum certainly hopes that she will survive the war and that she will be able to give testimony of everything. If nothing else her choice to work for the Jewish Council and her farewell words “Will you wait for me?” should set them thinking, those commentators who claim that Etty Hillesum wittingly chose to die or who accuse her of being passive. Indeed she did not expect any good to come from being deported to the “labor camps”; even so she hoped she would survive, in

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<sup>8</sup> Pomerans gives another translation, leaving one sentence out and altering another one: “(...) it's our bounden duty to try. But that argument is specious. For while everyone tries to save himself, vast numbers are nevertheless disappearing.” What is lost here, is that Hillesum may refer to the quota, the number of Jews that were deported by order of the German occupying authorities. People who were considering to go into hiding always realized that in their stead someone else would ‘have to go’. (Translator's note)

spite of her poor physical condition. She is looking forward to a time, “later”, when she can tell people about it, when she can give testimony of the war events: “I hope I shall remember everything that happens to us so that one day I’ll be able to retell it all.” Manja Pach<sup>9</sup> correctly argues that Etty Hillesum uses the word “later” quite often in her notebooks. The texts are evidence of a strong hope, even if Hillesum realizes that the Nazis “are out to destroy us completely”.

Etty Hillesum thinks in psychological rather than political terms, not only about the war but also about resistance. To her resistance is not necessarily militant resistance, visible resistance or joining a resistance organization. For Hillesum resistance takes place on the level of the psyche and of her daily contacts with other people, friend or foe. When she writes that “I don’t feel I’m in their clutches” she expresses a feeling of inner freedom, of resistance of the mind. She does not feel robbed of her freedom. While the outside world is getting smaller and smaller, Hillesum’s inner world – her “world inner space” – is getting bigger and bigger. Concentrating on the inner life, which is increasingly expressed in religious terms, Etty Hillesum builds up her inner defenses and resistance. She seeks a haven within her to guard herself against the approaching destruction. Eventually she refers to this haven as “God”: “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’.” In the middle of the war she does not feel in anybody’s clutches, but she does feel “in your arms, oh God”. Then she feels “so protected and sheltered and so steeped in eternity”. From this inner perception she wants to face the world. Typical for this attitude seems to be the absence of hatred. But, Hillesum writes, that does not imply “the absence of moral indignation”.

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<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Manja Pach, ‘Een dierbaar woord uit het werk van Etty Hillesum: “later”’, in: *Praktische Humanistiek*, special Etty Hillesum issue, edited by Ton Jorna & Marco van Groenendaal, 9 (1999) no. 1, 47-51. Cfr. Manja Pach’s essay ‘Let’s talk about Hope’ in: *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum*, 351-363 (see: Bibliographic Notes).

Concentrating on one's inner life is not a unique attitude to life during the Nazi terror. Piet Schrijvers<sup>10</sup> compares Etty Hillesum's attitude to the phenomenon of *innere Emigration*, a German term for mental withdrawal from the prevailing social-political situation by concentrating on *Innernessigkeit*, on one's inner self.<sup>11</sup> During the Hitler regime, from 1933 to 1945, it was a way for Jewish Germans to hold their own against their Nazi compatriots. Both biographies and literary texts are characterized by *innere Emigration*, which is sometimes formulated as a "sign of flight in subjectivity, in sentimentality and in a non-political *Weltinnenraum*". Ignoring the negative tone of this description, it is remarkable that in this definition Rilke's concept of *Weltinnenraum* ("world inner space") is being used. *Weltinnenraum* or "world inner space" is a key term for Etty Hillesum. Unraveling the "inner self" concept culturally and historically, Schrijvers demonstrates to what extent Hillesum's concentration on her inner life – characterized by her intense love of nature and her search for God in her inner self – can be seen within the perspective of *innere Emigration*. This move to one's inner world, which according to Etty Hillesum is as real as the outside world, enables Hillesum and many of her Jewish contemporaries to hold firm mentally and morally in a hostile world. It is an attitude of life that is not immediately associated with resistance, but it certainly can be seen as an *attitude* of resistance, of inner resistance. It is spiritual resistance against a hostile world.

Although the question of Hillesum's attitude of resistance can be approached from the perspective of inner resistance, that would be a rather limited outlook on a complex problem. In itself, Etty Hillesum's decision to take a job with the Jewish Council proves the intricacy of her situation in those days. As I said in the introduction, the Jewish Council was established by the German occupiers in February 1941 as a Jewish organization that was to administer the Jewish community in the Netherlands.

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<sup>10</sup> Dutch emeritus professor of Latin Language and Literature, essayist and award-winning translator of classical poetry. (Translator's note)

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Piet Schrijvers, 'Etty Hillesum in joodse contexten', in: Ria van den Brandt & Klaas A.D. Smelik (eds.), *Etty Hillesum in facetten*, Etty Hillesum Studies I, Budel: Damon, 2003, 37-55.

Through this Jewish Council the Nazis imposed their anti-Jewish measures; working for the Council seemed to give some protection against deportation. Initially Etty Hillesum rejects the thought of asking for a job with the Jewish Council. On July 11, 1942, she writes, "I have been recommended for some sort of soft job with the Jewish Council. They had permission to hire 180 people last week, and the desperate are thronging there in droves, as shipwrecked people might cling for dear life to a piece of driftwood. But I think it's useless and illogical to take steps in that direction. Moreover I am not the kind of person to pull any strings."<sup>12</sup> Notwithstanding these thoughts, that same month Etty Hillesum begins working as a typist with the Jewish Council in surroundings that in her words are best described "as midway between hell and a madhouse". Her choice to work for the Jewish Council may once more have to do with Spier's situation, and it shows that Hillesum finds herself in an awkward position. On July 28, 1942, she writes, "If only he [Spier] gets well, and I do not have to leave yet, and if I can just see him for five minutes each day." Chances are that as an employee of the Jewish Council she can remain in Spier's neighborhood, at least for the time being. Such private considerations are traversed by other considerations, and she is well aware of the dubiousness of her choice. On the same day she writes, "Nothing can ever atone for the fact, of course, that one section of the Jewish population is helping to transport the majority out of the country. History will pass judgment in due course." Hillesum's attitude of inner resistance is caught in a complex web of contradictory forces.

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<sup>12</sup> In Pomerans' translation her initial refusal to work for the Jewish Council is glossed over: "They had permission to hire 180 people last week, and the desperate are thronging there in droves, as shipwrecked people might cling for dear life to a piece of driftwood. But that is as far as I am prepared to go, and beyond that I am not willing to pull any strings." (Translator's note)



## 17.

*Never resign, never run away. Take everything in, suffer if must; it's not so bad. But never, never resignation –*  
30 April 1942

*Suffering is not beneath human dignity. I mean that it's possible to suffer with dignity and without. I mean that most of us in the West do not understand the art of suffering and experience a thousand fears instead. We cease to be alive, being instead full of fear, bitterness, hatred, and despair. God knows, it's only too easy to understand why. But when we are deprived of our lives, are we really deprived of very much? And I wonder if there is much of a difference between being consumed here by a thousand fears or in Poland by a thousand lice and by hunger? We have to accept death as part of life, even the most horrible of deaths.*  
2 July 1942

Etty Hillesum regularly writes about her attitude towards the evil of war. From her texts we can derive that she would reject resignation and running away as a personal attitude: “Never resign, never run away.” To Hillesum resignation is a wrong way of acquiescence, giving up all ideals about the future of mankind. People who resign reconcile themselves to the facts, without any illusions, and stop fighting for any cause whatsoever. It is a fruitless form of submission. To Hillesum running away is to fearfully avoid pain, to avoid suffering. Does this mean that Hillesum, like some people say, is a masochist? Hillesum herself does not think she is. Suffering is not unambiguous. In December 1941 she writes, “I thought this yesterday: there is a big difference between the sensual enjoyment of going in search of suffering, or accepting it as it comes. The first is an unhealthy masochism; the second is a healthy acceptance of life. Nor need we go in search of “suffering”, but whenever it thrusts itself upon us we must not avoid it. And it thrusts itself upon us at every step, but life is beautiful for all that. We suffer most by playing hide and

seek with suffering and calling curses down upon it.” In Hillesum’s eyes it is all about a form of suffering which is equal to dealing with things, “taking everything in”. Whatever it is that forces itself on you, do not avoid it but see it as a part of life, even if it hurts. She seems to persist in this vision. More than four months later she draws an analogy with Procrustes “who was stretched until he fitted into a very large bed.” (A wrong analogy as Procrustes himself was the torturer.) She continues, “I feel – again – as if I were being stretched. It is horribly painful and almost beyond my strength to bear, but if I am able to, then I really shall have grown that much more. But never resign, I told myself suddenly with inner resolve, never run away for fear of not being up to something. I know that I can take everything that comes, even though I may suffer.” Hillesum’s view of resistance is closely related to her view of suffering; in fact, she even writes about “the art of suffering”.

According to Hillesum most people in the West “do not understand the art of suffering and experience a thousand fears instead”. She compares the reaction of Westerners to the reaction of Russians. She feels that a Westerner does not know how to deal with suffering, as opposed to a Russian “who bears his burden to the end, buckles down under the full weight of his emotions and suffers to his very depths”. Her criticism of “us in the West” – thus including herself – is fierce: “We stop halfway and relieve ourselves with words, reflections, philosophies, theoretical treatises and what have you. We stop in the middle of experiencing our emotions, can bear and endure them no further, and our brains come to our aid, rid us of our burden and build their theories on it.” It is the fact that Westerners are unable to suffer to their “very depths” but instead need fitting theories and systems, that represents a flaw “in their vitality, a flaw in their capacity to bear things”. Being prepared to face anything that comes and being ready to deal with it – to suffer – makes people strong and gives them more power. When you take “suffering into the bargain” and thus have mastered the art of suffering, you make a choice, not *against* but *for* life. Resignation and running away do not draw you any closer to life, but instead they go hand in hand with denial and alienation from reality. Or to formulate it in an even more radical fashion:

people who understand that death is part of life build up an inner strength, and such strength paves the way for true resistance. When writing about true resistance Hillesum may be thinking of the example she mentions about a Roman judge who says to a martyr, “Do you know that I have the power to have you killed?” And the martyr answers, “Yes, but I have the power of letting myself be killed.”

**18.**

*Humiliation always involves two: the one who does the humiliating, and the one who allows himself to be humiliated. If the second is missing, that is, if the receptive party is immune to humiliation, then the humiliation vanishes into thin air. All that remains are vexatious measures that interfere with daily life, but these are not humiliations that weigh heavily on the soul.*

20 June 1942

According to Etty Hillesum, rendering oneself immune to humiliation is her task and the task of all Jews: “We Jews should remember that.” It sounds as priggish as it does pedantic but Hillesum seems convinced: if you do not allow yourself to feel humiliated, the person who wants to humiliate you loses his weapons. That is all part of developing an effective inner resistance. We cannot answer the question whether Etty Hillesum as a person was truly equipped with such inner resistance, but her comments on the subject are worth mentioning. It is about acquiring an attitude of not feeling humiliated by whatever your opponent does. When you do not feel humiliated, you are immune to all sorts of attacks, after which “the humiliation vanishes into thin air”. Sure, there will still be “vexatious measures that interfere with daily life” but, she writes, these will be no “humiliations that weigh heavily on the soul”. Etty Hillesum thinks it is possible to feel great freedom in the most repressive situations. Whenever she comes across signs barring Jews from the countryside, she writes, “But above the one narrow path still left to us stretches the sky, intact.” There are many passages in which Etty Hillesum enjoys the “wide sky” above her head. The “wide sky”, “the air”, these are not rationed and available to everybody. She sees it all somewhat different than most: “But above the one narrow path still left to us stretches the sky, intact. They can’t do anything to us, they really can’t. They can harass us, they can rob us of our material goods, of our freedom of movement, but we ourselves forfeit our greatest assets by our misguided com-

pliance. By our feelings of being persecuted, humiliated, and oppressed. By our own hatred. By our swagger, which hides our fear.”

The correct attitude, Etty Hillesum writes, is not an attitude of hatred and swagger. Whoever allows himself to be led by feelings of suspicion and humiliation acts from a hurt ego, which will never benefit the person in question. She continues, “We may of course be sad and depressed by what has been done to us; that is only human and understandable. However, our greatest injury is one we inflict upon ourselves.” But how do we get the right attitude? According to Etty Hillesum by working on oneself. The therapeutic result of her working on herself seems to be a success, because in the middle of the war she writes, “I find life beautiful, and I feel free. The sky within me is as wide as the one stretching above my head. I believe in God and I believe in man, and I say so without embarrassment. Life is hard, but that is no bad thing. If one starts by taking one’s seriousness seriously, the rest follows.”<sup>13</sup> In a time of war which provokes everyone to militant resistance Hillesum seems to opt for nonviolent resistance: “True peace will come only when every individual finds peace within himself, when we have all vanquished and transformed our hatred for our fellow human beings of whatever race – even into love one day, although perhaps that is asking too much. It is, however, the only solution.” This “only solution” again mirrors Hillesum’s remedy for war: “Be the change you want to see in the world.” It is an approach which starts with the individual, concentrating on the psyche and on what Hillesum calls “suffering with dignity”. As I’ve already said, it is not a political approach but a psychological approach, in which the procurement of inner wisdom – the wide skies and the discovered God – plays a leading part. In many ways this form of resistance can be classified as *innere Emigration* as well. Psychological withdrawal is not necessarily the same as running away; it can also serve to reinforce one’s spiritual fighting strength. In doing so, praying becomes increasingly important for Etty Hillesum. Praying helps her to become stronger. On May

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<sup>13</sup> Pomerans: “taking one’s own importance seriously”. Unusual or not, Etty Hillesum wrote “zijn ernst ernstig nemen”: taking one’s seriousness seriously. (Translator’s note)

18, 1942, she writes, “The threat grows ever greater, and terror increases from day to day. I draw prayer round me like a dark protective wall, withdraw inside it as one might into a convent cell and then step outside again, calmer and stronger and more collected again.”



VII.  
WISDOM



## 19.

*Christ and the Jews. Two philosophies, sharply defined, brilliantly documented, mature and defended with passion and vigor. But I can't help feeling that every hotly championed philosophy holds some form of deceit, that "the truth" is violated again and again.*

30 November 1941

*An element of deception necessarily sneaks into every "ism" because "nothing is true, not even that".*

1 December 1941

The wisdom Etty Hillesum acquires is not a sharply defined belief or dogmatic truth. Nor is her wisdom the outcome of disciplined philosophical thinking or a collection of petty facts. Hillesum's notion of wisdom is linked to an ability to let go, which reminds us of Eastern lessons for life or Master Eckhart's philosophy (more about that in the next chapter about God).

Even though Hillesum longs for a "foothold", she does not believe in "isms". She has her doubts about the "acquired, rationalist and socialist belief" from her college days. Every "ism", socialism included, evokes dissent and thus paves the way for animosity and hatred. According to Hillesum wisdom has nothing to do with animosity and hatred. Wisdom has to do with giving free rein to "this confusing, ever-shifting life of ours". She writes, "We form fixed ideas about the things around us in order to have some certainty in this confusing, ever-shifting life of ours, but in doing so we sacrifice real life with all its nuances and elements of surprise, as well as selling it short." In other words, life prevails over doctrine. Nothing can be forced into a system. "And," Hillesum adds, "it is to systems, sometimes built with great hardship, that men sacrifice reality and truth." Even so Hillesum acknowledges the sincerity and necessity of the human urge to systematize: "Man's urge to systematize, to combine a host of contradictions into a solid structure, is also a

quest for truth. And we do need some kind of system, often to escape from chaos. But we must also be able to let go of it again.” Building up and letting go: building up to escape from chaos, letting go to do justice to reality with all its opposites, because as Hillesum writes, it cannot be seen from one angle, be subsumed under one principal idea. The only way to find harmony is to accept all life’s contradictions: “Every pole has its opposite, like it or not.” She continues to say that it is not enough to grasp the multiplicity with your mind alone; you must also live it. Only that would preserve a person from rigid systematism.

It is true Etty Hillesum sympathizes with a number of philosophies, but once they become too much of a fortification that must be defended, she gets suspicious. All too deliberate defense mechanisms require elements of deceit and thus do not do justice to our “confusing, ever-shifting life”. She even uses the word “violate”: “That ‘the truth’ is violated again and again.” Therefore she sees Christianity and Judaism as two philosophies that in all their brilliance and maturity can be dubious as well. As soon as a body of thought is crystallized and fixated, “our big words” dominate the scene. According to Hillesum it is these big words that we must forget and let go: “Such words as God and Death and Suffering and Eternity are best forgotten. We have to become as simple and as wordless as the growing corn or the falling rain. We must just be.” Or “We must forget all our big words, begin with God and end with Death, and we must become as simple as pure spring water. Above all, a little less wordy.”

The pattern of letting go increasingly becomes a constant in Hillesum’s way of thinking. Initially, because of her urge to oversee the whole, she seems to believe more in the sinew of Western philosophical vocabularies. Great philosophers from the Western canon are passed in review, but in the end they are no more than indefinite supernumeraries in a mental development of which the final attainment has more to do with a spiritual outlook on life than with a philosophical system. Through the help of the aforementioned work by the cultural philosopher Durant, Etty Hillesum defines philosophy as “a view of the whole, as the spirit, spread out over life and forging unity out of chaos”. Durant doubts

whether this philosophical “view of the whole” is still possible in the twentieth century, and Etty Hillesum seems to share these doubts: “Analysis is rushing ahead and synthesis is lagging behind.” Scholarship is breaking up into disciplines, into isolated analyses and “the intellectual balance that sprang from a warm religious belief has disappeared. (...) The whole world seems consumed by an unruly individualism, which reflects the chaotic fragmentation of our character.” This supposed collapse of a philosophical and unifying view of the whole suits Etty Hillesum; collecting and accumulating petty facts is not the way for her. No wonder this one line by Durant stands out for her: “Knowledge is power, but wisdom alone is freedom.”

## 20.

*You can't control everything with the mind; let the well of emotion and intuition bubble a little bit too. I realize that knowledge is power, and that's probably why I accumulate knowledge, out of a desire to be important. I do not really know. But Lord, give me wisdom, not knowledge. It's only the knowledge that leads to wisdom that will make a person – at least me – happy, not the kind that leads to power. A little peace, a lot of kindness and a little wisdom; whenever I have these inside me I feel I am doing well.*

5 September 1941

*Life cannot be captured in a few formulas. And that is just what I keep trying to do and what makes you think too much. You try to capture life in a few formulas, but it will not work; life is full of endless nuances and cannot be captured in an axiom or be made simpler.*

22 October 1941

*Most people carry stereotyped ideas about life in their heads. We have to rid ourselves of everything, of all preconceptions, of all slogans, of all restraint. Find the courage to let go of everything, every standard, every conventional bulwark. Dare to make the giant leap into the cosmos; only then life will become infinitely rich and overflowing, even in its deepest suffering.*

7 July 1942

Her thirst for liberating wisdom works as a driving force in Hillesum's comings and goings. Doing her own therapy she soon concludes that to acquire knowledge she should not choose "Western rationalism" but her "well of emotion and intuition". This set contrast – "Western rationalism" on the one hand and "emotions and intuitions" on the other – has a profound effect on Hillesum's outlook on human knowledge. Like Jung she is convinced that the subconscious of man has knowledge at its disposal which is of vital importance to humanity, but which is denied by

“Western rationalism”. In her own way she adopts Jung’s spiritual-therapeutic views: “You shouldn’t live on your brains alone but on deeper, more abiding sources, though you should gratefully accept your brains as a precious tool for delving into what problems your soul brings forth. To put it more soberly, what all of this means for me is probably that I should have greater trust in my intuition.” In all kinds of variations the contrast between brains and intuition is mentioned time and again, especially when Hillesum urges herself to daily contemplation. As we have seen in *Discipline* she uses several German phrases for this daily contemplation: “hineinhören”, “hineinhorchen”, “Innenschau”, “sich versenken”, “stille Stunde”. Through contemplation, through passively listening to her deepest self, the strength of intuition and wisdom is being built up. Too much thinking and reasoning does not bring her any closer to wisdom. After all, Hillesum writes, “Thinking gets you nowhere. It may be a fine and noble aid in academic studies, but you can’t think your way out of emotional difficulties. That takes something altogether different. You have to make yourself passive then, and just listen. Re-establish contact with a slice of eternity.” Wisdom versus knowledge, inside versus outside, passivity versus activity, listening versus thinking. From the onset Hillesum makes use of such opposites and encourages herself to descend into her inner self, which will bring her wisdom; true knowledge about herself and about life.

Thus Etty Hillesum does not crave for the kind of knowledge which yields power and prestige, but knowledge which leads to wisdom. She is convinced that wisdom will make her happy. “A little peace, a lot of kindness and a little wisdom”; yes, that is what she wants. And “whenever I have these inside me I feel I am doing well.” She does not believe in formulas and preconceptions. Formulas and preconceptions about life are not the same as life, which is indefinable. “Life cannot be captured in a few formulas,” Hillesum concludes. She regularly reproaches herself that she wants to encompass too much of the world with her brains. “That is your disease: you want to capture life in formulas of your own. You want to embrace all aspects of life with your intellect instead of allowing yourself to be embraced by life.” She thinks there is

something compulsive about it all. Time and again she urges herself to let go of all her fixations so she can do justice to life with all its nuances. According to Hillesum, truth and wisdom about life have nothing to do with standing still, they have to do with movement. Life continually changes. Life is like a stream. In that sense Hillesum does not believe in an absolute truth; like a Buddhist she can almost claim that “there are no absolutes, that everything is relative, endlessly diverse and in eternal motion, and that it is precisely for that reason that life is so exciting and fascinating, but also so very, very painful.”

In the words of Julius Spier, Etty Hillesum dares to make “the giant leap into the cosmos”. This leap is inextricably bound up with the discipline of her so-called Buddhist quarter of an hour, which continually confronts her with her restless psyche: inhibitions, inferiority complexes, preconceived notions. She feels that often the route to her deepest sources is barricaded by the vices of her “little ego”. In words that sometimes sound a bit mystical, she encourages herself to let go of things that block her, including her own “stereotyped ideas about life. (...) We have to rid ourselves of everything, of all preconceptions, of all slogans, of all restraint.” Yes, Hillesum argues, we should all “find the courage to let go of everything, every standard, every conventional bulwark.” Whoever dares to make that giant leap into the cosmos will experience the endless richness of life. Letting go of the personal clears the way for the “overpersonal”, experiencing the cosmos. People who develop and fulfill themselves will grow to full vitality and be in contact with life within and without themselves. For Hillesum this “greater awareness” is an experience for which she uses various images and words, including the word “God”.

## 21.

*I do not want the skeptical outside world to learn that I do anything as peculiar as chiology. In fact, it is far from "peculiar" or anything of the kind. It is merely new, and people look on anything new that still has to make its way in the world as peculiar. Actually it is not so much the skeptical part of the outside world as the skeptical part in myself. Skepticism is nothing but laziness; I keep fighting it. And sometimes I am almost grateful that this business has crossed my path. It's not just some kind of bizarre infatuation; it is beginning to be something very serious and significant for me.*

29 September 1941

*Either everything is chance or nothing is chance. Now, it surely can't be by chance that at a given moment I happened to end up in Courbetstraat with a perfect idiot who dabbles in people's hands and who has since become the most important man ever to enter my life.*

29 September 1941

*Greater awareness and hence easier access to my inner sources. In the past I, too, used to be one of those who occasionally felt "I really am religious". Or something positive like that. But now I sometimes actually drop to my knees beside my bed, even on a cold winter night. And I listen in to myself, allowing myself to be led, not by anything on the outside, but by what wells up from deep within. It's still no more than a beginning, I know. But it is no longer a shaky beginning, it has already taken root.*

31 December 1941

The wisdom Etty Hillesum develops has got everything to do with her "greater awareness". However, it is not without question or struggle that Hillesum takes on this process, as her language in her early diary notes shows. She first meets Spier on February 3, 1941, "when I shyly pulled the bell at 27 Courbetstraat and a creepy character wearing some sort of antenna on his head examined my palms". The creepy character is Julius

Spier. And it is this creepy character, this “perfect idiot”, who by reading her hands puts Etty Hillesum on a higher plane. In a paradoxical way she is impressed. Her “critical, rational bit” rebels against it. She is skeptical, but her skepticism makes way for her deep fascination for Spier’s depth psychological and spiritual advice. Through him she will occupy herself with something “as peculiar as chiromancy” and makes “the big leap into the cosmos”. In the war year 1941, the twenty-seven-year-old Etty Hillesum opts depth psychological and spiritual matters, and she feels as if the fifty-four-year-old Julius Spier has taken her by the hand. His advice and guidance prove to be a serious affair for Etty Hillesum, maybe even an essential affair. “Either everything is chance or nothing is chance,” she writes, adding that it cannot be by chance that she met Spier. And perhaps it is not by chance that this meeting takes place during the first years of the occupation, in a period when the need for inner strength gets more intense. Etty Hillesum takes up her psychological arms; she mobilizes herself through greater awareness, looking for wisdom that is able to withstand the losses she is expecting. It is no coincidence that the pattern of letting go makes up such a core part of Hillesum’s wisdom. She foresees that she will have to leave her familiar world. She wants to arm herself against the possible loss of her world and creates an inner world, a world she will never be forced to give up. Her psychological mobilization is characterized – as we have seen in the chapter about resistance – by intense internalization and strong religious feelings. In July 1942 she writes, “With each minute that passes I shed more wishes and desires and attachments. I am ready for everything, for anywhere on this earth, wherever God may send me, and I am ready to bear witness in any situation and unto death that life is beautiful and meaningful and that it is not God’s fault that things are as they are at present, but our own.” And on September 22<sup>th</sup>, after her first sojourns in the transit camp of Westerbork, she writes from Wegerif’s house in the Metsustraat, “This house, I feel, is slowly losing its hold on me. It’s a good thing to be able to cut all ties with it. Very carefully, with great sorrow, but also in the certainty that it is all for the best and that there can be no other way, I let go, day by day.”



As argued before, Hillesum's psychological mobilization and her wisdom go hand in hand with the growth of religious feelings. The more she feels that she commands the "deeper forces" within her, the more her religiosity is growing. After a while she is no longer one of those who reluctantly say "I really am religious", but she will actually kneel and pray and feel protected by her prayers. Later she even writes that she can withdraw "into a prayer as into a convent cell and leave again with renewed strength and with peace regained." "Hineinhören", listening in to herself, seems to be gradually transforming itself to prayer. That is overlapped by a change of her diary's addressee. Whereas initially she wrote for herself, praising herself or giving herself a good talking-to, the addressee of her later writings is often God: "God, give me calm and let me face everything squarely." When her predicament worsens and she needs energy and strength, she finds benefit in her psychological mobilization, which had begun with her meeting Spier. After her first two stays in Westerbork she writes, "If after a long and arduous process, day in, day out, you manage to reach your primal sources, which I will call God now, and if you make certain that your path to God is unblocked – which you can do by 'working on yourself' – then you can keep renewing yourself at these sources and need never again be afraid of wasting your strength."

VIII.  
GOD

## 22.

*This phrase has been with me for several weeks: “You need courage to put that into words, the courage to speak God’s name.” S. once told me that it took quite a long time before he dared to say “God”, as if there was something ridiculous about it, even though he was a believer.*

14 December 1941

*I am only at the beginning, but the beginning is there, that much I know for certain. It means gathering all my strength, living my life with God and in God and having God within. (I find the word “God” so primitive at times; it is only a metaphor after all, an approach to our greatest and most continuous adventure; I’m sure that I do not even need the word “God”, which sometimes strikes me as a primitive, primordial sound. A makeshift construction.)*

22 June 1942

“The courage to speak God’s name.” It is striking how God’s name occurs in Hillesum’s diary more and more. While initially she asks more philosophically phrased questions – we only have to think of her interest in Durant’s tome *The Mansions of Philosophy* – slowly but surely she turns to expressing religious feelings. After a reluctant start these feelings are soon voiced with euphoria and confidence. In that sense the therapy clearly is a success. Hillesum seems to be “unblocking” her soul and gaining new powers. For these new powers she uses several images. What strikes us are her descriptions of nature that evoke openness, transparency and streaming life: broad heavenly skies, the cosmos, empty landscapes, wide streams, seas and oceans. The blocked soul gets unblocked; once more she feels life streaming within and she approaches her “greatest and most continuous adventure”. At one point Hillesum calls this greatest of all adventures a “life with God and in God and having God within”. She increasingly uses the word “God” though at the same time she finds the word “so primitive”. She writes, “It is only a

metaphor after all, an approach to our greatest and most continuous adventure; I'm sure that I do not even need the word 'God', which sometimes strikes me as a primitive, primordial sound. A makeshift construction." Such thoughts about the word "God" Etty Hillesum finds in Carl Gustav Jung's works as well. In the second week of January 1942 she writes down one of her favorite Jung extracts about God's name, both in her diary and in *Levenskunst*, her book of quotations with Henny Tideman. It is the fragment about man's tendency, when having an overwhelming experience, an inner encounter with a strange power, to call it "God". However, Jung writes, "in that sense, 'God' too is a theory in the most literal sense, an outlook, an image which the limited human mind creates in order to express an unfathomable and ineffable experience. The experience alone is real, not to be disputed; but the images can be soiled or torn up." In other words, the experience in itself is the only reality and every name for this extraordinary experience is a "theory", an "outlook", an "image" which the limited human mind creates to express an experience that goes beyond our thinking, writing and speech. What remains, says Jung, is "the experience" ("das Erlebnis"). By contrast all fabricated images of this experience are vulnerable; they can be soiled or torn up.

Two days after Etty Hillesum copies this Jung extract in her diary, on January 14, 1942, she writes about life as one unbroken entity within her, "streaming out in all directions". She writes about a source, deep within her, "so palpable, so vital and forever in motion". She also concludes that she has become milder in her relationships with others, as with her friend Henny Tideman: "In the past, at the evening lectures, when Tideman was so childishly highflying, so silly and naïve, almost like a schoolgirl, I would suddenly lose sight of the rest of her personality. But now I continue to keep the rest of her in mind. I keep seeing the merits of the whole person, even in her superficial and more banal moments." Etty Hillesum seems to have arrived at another stage, feeling a lot of life and love, linking the word "God" to these feelings.

## 23.

*There is a really deep well inside me, and in it dwells God. Sometimes I can reach there, 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.*

26 August 1941

*After all, that vastness within me is nothing but being filled with you, oh God.*

12 December 1941

*I will help you, God, to stop you ebbing away in me, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that you cannot help us; that we must help you and thus help ourselves. And that is all we can rescue these days and also all that really matters: a little piece of you, God, in ourselves.*

12 July 1942

Etty Hillesum's process of self-realization undeniably runs parallel to a process of religious growth. Etty Hillesum feels increasingly "vast" and "spacious", and connects this experience to the divine. The vastness she feels within her is not described as an indifferent void, as therapeutically banishing your ego, but as experiencing the presence of God: "After all, that vastness within me is nothing but being filled with you, oh God." Etty Hillesum is not, in her own words, one of those people who seek God outside themselves; she is one of those who seek God inside. "There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I can reach there." She describes her encounters with God as something which takes place deep within her, in the sources, in the well. Her inner world proves to be a home which can be converted into a palace of divine reality. At

the same time she shrinks from finding words or images to describe this overwhelming experience. She thinks that even the word “God” is only a makeshift construction. In line with her favorite thinkers and poets, like Jung and Rilke, she is suspicious about words and images. That may be the reason why, in Westerbork, Etty Hillesum had an anthology of Meister Eckhart with her. The anthology contains near-Buddhist texts that confirm the most important elements and structure of Hillesum’s religious perception: the process of letting go, contemplation, finding God within your deepest self and a name for the divine always being inadequate. In that sense Hillesum’s language seems to be a modernization of the language of some of the mystics.

In Hillesum’s texts several perspectives of approaching the divine can be detected, but there is one important aspect of Hillesum’s image of God: vulnerability. For Etty Hillesum the God she believes in is not a God she will call to account for all the misery around her. For instance, after a sleepless night in the tense summer of 1942 she writes, “Yes, God, there does not seem to be much you can do about the situation; it’s all part of life.” In Hillesum’s eyes not God but man is responsible for the disastrous course of events, for all the hatred and the terror. She continues, “I do not call you to account for it all, instead you may call us to account later on.” Hillesum reverses roles: It is not God who must protect man, it is man who must protect God. She feels it as her responsibility to shepherd God to better times: “I will help you, God, to stop you ebbing away in me, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that you cannot help us, that we must help you and thus help ourselves. And that is all we can save these days and also all that really matters: a little piece of you, God, in ourselves.” After digging up and cherishing this piece of God within her, Hillesum would like to dig up pieces of God “in the distressed hearts of other people”. According to her, saving God has everything to do with the readiness of people to give the divine a home: “With every heartbeat it becomes clearer to me: that you cannot help us, but we must help you and defend your dwelling place inside us to the last.” For Hillesum saving the divine dwelling place within oneself has to do with saving mankind.

## 24.

*I am not challenging you, oh God; my life is one great dialogue with you. I may never become the great artist I would really like to be, but I am already secure in you, God. Sometimes I would like to etch small profundities and vibrating short stories, but I always end up with just one single word: God. And that says everything, and there is no need to say more. And all my creative powers are translated into inner dialogues with you; the undulation of my heart has grown wider and more involved and yet more peaceful; it is as if my inner riches are growing all the time.*

Letter to Henny Tideman, August 18, 1943

Of the people who interpret Hillesum's texts, many focus on her image of God; this is especially true for Catholic theologians. This comes as no surprise: Hillesum's religious experience, in the middle of the war, reveals deeply felt emotions. Her notes about her encounters with the divine and the responsibility she feels for the future of God and mankind make a strong appeal to a religious person's way of thinking.

"How can we talk about God after Auschwitz?" is the question that the Canadian theologian Alexandra Pleshoyano asks in her dissertation about Etty Hillesum.<sup>14</sup> She opens up a vast theological perspective on Hillesum's works. Hillesum's texts have always inspired many theologians, but in the past some theologians, like other interpreters, have had the tendency to appropriate Hillesum's mental legacy too much as a Christian body of ideas and to link it to a mythology around Etty Hillesum as a person, making her a saint-like figure. Moreover they did not use the complete edition of Hillesum's texts, but based their view on the first, selective edition of her legacy. The biased portrayal of Etty Hil-

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<sup>14</sup> Cfr. Pleshoyano, Etty Hillesum: *L'amour comme "seule solution": Une herméneutique théologique au coeur du mal*, Münster: LIT Verlag, 2007 (Doctoral thesis, Radboud University Nijmegen).

lesum from Christian quarters has led to misconceptions, irritations and conflicts about her religiosity and image of God.

It is true that Etty Hillesum increasingly quotes Christian sources, but not exclusively. When she leaves for Westerbork for the last time she also takes the Koran and Talmud in her little cane trunk. She maintains a broad mind, sympathizing with every source that inspires her, that feeds and strengthens her. At the time some of her contemporaries, like her friend Hanneke Starreveld, were a bit surprised by Etty Hillesum's growing faith in God. In several interviews Hanneke Starreveld suggested that Hillesum's growing religiosity had to do with the influence Julius Spier and Henny Tideman had on her. And indeed we can read in Hillesum's texts that she saw both Spier and Tideman as "mediators" between God and herself; the role of these two people cannot be underestimated. Years later, in a filmed interview, Henny Tideman said that in her eyes she only affected Julius Spier's religious perception, not Etty Hillesum's. She feels that her influence on Etty Hillesum was mainly indirect, through Spier's enormous influence on Hillesum. This may be true as well, although in her texts Hillesum herself does speak of the great role Tideman played in her life.

On the day Spier died Hillesum writes in her diary that he taught her to speak out God's name without embarrassment. "You were the mediator between God and me, and now you, the mediator, has gone, and my path leads straight to God; it is good the way it is, I can feel that." Four days earlier she wrote a similar text to Tideman, "Dear great Tideman! Did you know that you, too, are one of the precious gifts God has given me in this life? I say it quite openly and naturally: God. You have taught me to say it like that every moment of the day and the night, you and our Friend." She could never have written this to Henny Tideman at the beginning of their acquaintance; initially Hillesum has ambivalent feelings about Tideman's Christian faith, which she found rather childlike. Moreover Tideman is strongly influenced by the Oxford Movement, and Hillesum wants to have nothing to do with them. After attending a meeting of these worshippers she writes, "So exhibitionist. Such public love-making with God. So bacchanalian, and then all those



pious petty-bourgeois men and languishing old spinsters. No! Never again!” Researcher Denise de Costa<sup>15</sup> agrees that in the beginning Hillesum is irritated by Tideman’s informal and childlike association with God and sees it as “lacking stature”. At the same time she does envy Tideman for her simple faith in God. But initially Spier’s religious attitude and vocabulary hold a bigger appeal to her than Tideman’s naïve religious perception and language. However, in the end Hillesum is greatly impressed by the way Tideman persists in her attitude towards religion. That, she thinks, really has class. What she shares with “Tidewoman” is their love for Spier. Henny Tideman and Etty Hillesum are close to Spier. His illness and death brings the two women closer to each other and gives Hillesum’s religiosity an extra impulse. In a letter to Henny Tideman she writes about the influence Spier has had on her: “The great work he has done on me: he has dug up God in me and brought Him to life, and I shall now go on digging and seeking God in all the human hearts I meet, no matter where on earth that may be.” In another letter to Tideman, Etty Hillesum copies a fragment from a diary that was lost in Westerbork. It is striking how God, as in many other of her later writings, is the one she is addressing: “I am not challenging you, oh God; my life is one great dialogue with you.” In her last weeks in Westerbork her adventure with the divine has assumed vast dimensions. “I may never become the great artist I would really like to be, but I am already secure in you, God. Sometimes I would like to etch small profundities and vibrating short stories, but I always end up with just one single word: God. And that says everything, and there is no need to say more. And all my creative powers are translated into inner dialogues with you; the undulation of my heart has grown wider and more involved and yet more peaceful; it is as if my inner riches are growing all the time.” It is August 18, 1943. Six days later, on August 24, 1943, there will be a transport ‘to the East’ and Etty Hillesum will write her most impressive testimony of the camp

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<sup>15</sup> Denise de Costa’s book (dissertation) has been translated into English (see: Bibliographic Notes).

IX.  
TESTIFYING

## 25.

*The whole of Europe is gradually becoming one great prison camp. The whole of Europe will undergo this same bitter experience. Simply reporting the bare facts of families torn apart, of possessions plundered and liberties forfeited, will soon become monotonous. Nor is it possible to give outsiders picturesque accounts of barbed wire and stew. Besides, I wonder how many outsiders will be left if history continues along the paths it has taken.*

First Westerbork Letter, December 1942

At the end of 1943, while the war is still on, Etty Hillesum's accounts about Westerbork are illegally published. A small book, *Three Letters from the Painter Johannes Baptiste van der Pluym (1843-1912)*, includes two letters by Etty Hillesum. The first letter was written at the end of 1942, during leave in Amsterdam (First Westerbork Letter), and the second was written in Westerbork, on August 24, 1943, fourteen days before she was deported to Auschwitz (Second Westerbork Letter). In the summer of 1942, being a Jewish Council employee, she asks to be transferred to the department "Social Welfare for People in Transit" in Westerbork. At the end of July 1942 she arrives in the camp. Her function with the Jewish Council gives her a special position; unlike many other internees she can leave Westerbork and go home. Her first stay is only brief: nearly two weeks. Before the middle of August she is back in Amsterdam. Her next sojourn in Westerbork is equally brief. On September 15, 1942, while she is on leave in Amsterdam, Julius Spier dies. Her own fragile health forces her to stay in the capital, which she regrets because already she has fond memories of the people in Westerbork. However, she reconciles herself to the situation. It is not until much later, on November 20th, that she returns to Westerbork. Soon she writes to the home front about her multitude of impressions. "It's too much that comes bursting in. I'm sure I could talk for a year at a stretch about this one week." On December 5<sup>th</sup> she is in Amsterdam again and in the same month writes the First

Westerbork Letter; ultimately she will stay in Amsterdam for half a year. On June 6<sup>th</sup> she returns to Westerbork; nearly a month later, on July 5, 1943, the special status for Jewish Council employees, and thus Etty Hillesum's special status, is rescinded. On July 10<sup>th</sup> she writes to Maria Tuinzing, "This is the last letter I'll be allowed to write for a while. This afternoon our identity cards will be taken from us, and we will be 'Kampinsassen', camp inmates from then on."

On August 24, 1943, in her Second Westerbork Letter, she gives an account from the camp about the deportation of 1020 Jews. Fourteen days later she is deported herself, with her parents and her brother Misha in the same train though in another car. Her brother Jaap arrives in Westerbork at the end of September and is deported to Bergen-Belsen in February 1944. He too will not survive the war.

Hillesum's two Westerbork Letters, published in 1943 in a clandestine book, were the subject of a thesis by Anne-Marleen Hulsebos in 2002.<sup>16</sup> Meticulously Hulsebos analyses the possible genesis of this illegal publication. She claims that Etty Hillesum probably never knew about the plans for this wartime project; in any case she never lived to see its publication. In an earlier thesis by Jelka Driehuis,<sup>17</sup> the power of the Westerbork Letters is stressed by comparing them to the published diary of another inmate, Philip Mechanicus (*In Depot*) and the historian Jacques Presser's works on the persecution (his short novel *The Night of the Girondins* and his extensive study *Ashes in the wind – The destruction of the Dutch Jews*). The two Westerbork Letters by Hillesum play a vital role in the collective memory of the transit camp Westerbork. Especially Hillesum's second letter, written not in Amsterdam but in Westerbork, is impressive.

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<sup>16</sup> Cfr. Anne-Marleen Hulsebos, *Een monument van levenskunst: Over de onthullende Westerbork-brieven van Etty Hillesum (1914-1943) in een verholde oorlogsuitgave*, Amsterdam, 2002 (Master's thesis, University of Amsterdam).

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. Jelka Driehuis, *Holocaust-literatuur in Nederland: Een studie naar de representatie van Westerbork in werk van Etty Hillesum, Philip Mechanicus, en Jacques Presser*, Amsterdam, 1993 (Master's thesis, University of Amsterdam).

In her first letter she tries to give an overall picture of the situation in the camp. She goes into Westerbork's recent history, the creation and organization of the camp, the incoming transports after a round-up, the transports from Westerbork 'to the East' and the considerable social and cultural inequality in the camp ("even at a time of shared distress inequality is maintained"). In the same First Letter we read that "the whole of Europe is gradually becoming one great prison camp", and that "the whole of Europe will undergo this same bitter experience; simply reporting the bare facts of families torn apart, of possessions plundered and liberties forfeited, will soon become monotonous." However, finding words to describe these bare facts proves to be quite challenging. Though already experienced as a writer Hillesum is uncertain about her power of expression. In the First Westerbork Letter she writes, "I could tell right away that nothing would come of my report on Westerbork; the first attempt had bogged down in generalities." By the end of the letter she is dissatisfied by what she has written: "Perhaps my continuous chatter persuaded you that I have now told you something about Westerbork? When I let Westerbork rise up in my mind's eye, in all its facets and its dramatic history, with all its spiritual and material needs, I realize that I have failed." She goes on to say that she could have told quite another story, one filled with hatred, bitterness and rebellion.

Indeed, Hillesum's Westerbork Letters do not stand out for their hatred, bitterness and rebellion. We saw in the chapter about resistance that in her eyes the absence of hatred is not the same as the absence of moral indignation. But her letters are not deprived of moments of great despair and uncertainty; in the First Westerbork Letter she writes, "When the first transport passed through our hands, there was a moment when I thought I would never again laugh and be gay, that I had changed suddenly into another abruptly aged person, alienated from all the people from the past." She is shocked by the fact that the considerable social inequality among the Jews is maintained in the camp, by the considerable lack of space and by the transports from Westerbork 'to the East'. At the same time she stresses the solidarity she has witnessed in Westerbork. "After the first roundup transports, when people arrived in slippers and

underclothes, the whole of Westerbork, in a single horror-stricken and heroic gesture, stripped to the skin.” Bare facts of one kind are followed by bare facts of another kind, hatred by love. Hillesum keeps her eyes open, but is hesitant to make any of her philosophical remarks. “But what about those old people? All those aged, infirm people? What can I do with my profundities in their presence?” Apart from being hesitant she feels shame. “This is such a dreadfully sad and shameful bit of human history that you really do not know what to say about it. You feel ashamed that you stood by and were unable to prevent it.” In spite of all her hesitance and shame, she ends her First Westerbork Letter with a reference to “the love the Jew Paul wrote about in the thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the citizens of Corinth”. She says it is this love which could make the earth habitable again.

## 26.

*I hope I shall remember what is happening so that one day I'll be able to tell people about it. It is so different from everything you read in books, altogether different. I can't yet write about the thousand little things I witness every day, but I want very much to remember them. I have noticed that my powers of observation register everything unerringly, and that gives me special joy. While being submerged in it, with all my tiredness, suffering and what have you, this is constant: my joy, the artist's joy in observing things and in shaping them mentally into an image of its own.*

7 July 1942

*One summer evening I sat eating red cabbage at the edge of this yellow lupine field that stretched from our dining barracks to the delousing barracks, and feeling reflective and inspired I said, "One ought to write a chronicle of Westerbork." An older man to my left, also eating red cabbage, answered, 'Yes, but to do that you'd have to be a great poet.' He is right; it would take a great poet. Little journalistic pieces won't do.*

First Westerbork Letter, December 1942

*One should be able to write fairy tales here. It sounds strange, but if you wanted to convey something of Westerbork life you could do it best in that form. The misery here is so beyond all bounds of reality that it has become unreal. Sometimes I walk through the camp laughing secretly to myself because of the completely grotesque circumstances. One would have to be a very great poet indeed to describe them; perhaps in about ten years I might get somewhere near it.*

Letter to Han Wegerif and others, July 8, 1943

*I have told you often enough that no words and images are adequate to describe nights like these. Even so I must try to convey something of it to you; you always have a feeling here of being the ears and eyes of a piece of Jewish history, feeling the need at times to let your small voice be*

*heard. We must keep one another in touch with everything that happens in the various outposts of this world, each one contributing their own little bit, until all over the world this mosaic will have taken shape after the war.*

Second Westerbork Letter, August 24, 1943

How to write about transit camp Westerbork? After her first experiences with the camp Etty Hillesum concludes that she has one real duty: “to write, to record, to retain.” Writing well implies reading well. After her first sojourns in Westerbork she finds that at last she feels capable of doing so. “And there [in Westerbork] all of a sudden I had this experience: in the faces of people, in thousands of gestures, brief comments, life stories, I was suddenly able to read our age – and much more than our age alone. By teaching myself to read my inner self, I discovered that I could also read other people’s inner selves. It really seemed that with sensitive fingertips I touched the contours of these times and of life itself.” This almost euphoric state of mind went on for a while. “I read life and I know that I am capable of reading it, and in my youthful arrogance I am often sure that I can remember everything I have read this way, and that one day I will be able to tell people about it.” Later, in December 1942, telling people about it proves to be not that simple. We already saw that in her First Westerbork Letter Hillesum thought she had bogged down in generalities. She mentions her inability to evoke the reality of Westerbork. In the same letter she says, “One ought to write a chronicle of Westerbork.” And an older man answers, “Yes, but to do that you’d have to be a great poet.” At that moment she agrees: a chronicler of Westerbork ought to be a great poet; little journalistic pieces will not do. Later she realizes that apart from a poetic form the fairy tale form would be an effective tool to describe the situation in Westerbork. Especially because, as she writes on July 9, 1943, in a letter to the home front, its misery “is so beyond all bounds of reality that it has become unreal”. In the same letter, written in four days, she writes, “It is a complete madhouse here, one has to feel ashamed of for the next three hundred years.”

The extent to which Westerbork is becoming a madhouse is apparent in her Second Westerbork Letter, in which she describes a



transport on August 24, 1943. In it she writes “that no words and images are adequate to describe nights like these”. Even so she wants to write something for the home front; she has a feeling “of being the ears and eyes of a piece of Jewish history”. She feels the need to let her small voice be heard, to contribute her bit to the post-war mosaic of testimonies. She gives an almost cinematic account of events in this letter, as if she is walking through the camp with a camera, zooming in again and again on isolated scenes. Everything seems to happen at great speed: “I have to write it all down quickly and disorderly, because if I leave it until later I probably will not be able to do it, not believing that it really happened. Already it is like a delusion, drifting further and further away.” While the testimony from December 1942 is more general and sketchy on nearly all levels (a more distant description in both senses, since it was written in Amsterdam from memory), this testimony is much more concrete and full of close-ups. The author, who was rather more present in the first testimony, is now almost absent, though being in the middle of events. She no longer talks about herself but about the people around her, about a deportation night at Westerbork. However, this does not mean she does not mention her own thoughts at all. The confrontation with the faces of the *Grüne Polizei* – the armed escort – makes her desperate. “I struggled with the words that are the guiding principle of my life, that God made man after His Likeness.<sup>18</sup> That passage spent a difficult morning with me.” She will also question her own role as a “helper”: “What is going on, what mysteries are these, in what kind of fateful mechanism are we all trapped? It is not sufficient to just say that we are all cowards; we’re not that evil. We are confronted with deeper questions...” She tries to sum it all up with one concept: hell. “When I tell you that that night I was in hell, what does it mean to you? I said it to myself once, in the middle of the night, aloud and in an almost matter-of-fact way, ‘Right, I’m in hell now.’”

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<sup>18</sup> In Pomerans’ version this passage erroneously reads, “I sank to my knees with the words that preside over human life: And God made man after His likeness.” (Translator’s note)

## 27.

*The outside world may think of us as a gray, uniform, suffering mass of Jews. They know nothing of the gulfs and abysses and subtle differences that exist between individuals and groups; perhaps they will never be able to understand.*

Second Westerbork Letter, August 24, 1943

*Ah, there she goes again. It is the tough little ghetto woman, who was always in bed hungry because she never got any parcels. She has seven children here. She trips pluckily and busily around on her short legs. "What about it? I've got seven children, and they need a proper mum on their side." With nimble gestures she is stuffing a jute bag full of her belongings. "I won't leave nothing behind; me husband was sent on a year ago, and me two oldest boys have gone as well." She beams, "Me children are such darlings for me." She bustles about, she's busy, she packs, she has a kind word for everyone who goes by. A small, ugly ghetto woman with greasy black hair, dumpy and short legged. She wears a shabby, dark dress with short sleeves, which she must have worn behind the washtub back in Jodenbreestraat in Amsterdam. And now she is off to Poland in the same old dress, a three day journey, with seven children. 'What about it? I've got seven children, and they need a proper mum on their side.'*

Second Westerbork Letter, August 24, 1943

*A young mother says to me almost apologetically, "My baby doesn't usually cry; it's almost as if he feels what's happening." She picks up the child, a lovely baby about eight months old, from a makeshift crib and smiles at it. "If you don't behave yourself, mummy will not take you along with her!"*

Second Westerbork Letter, August 24, 1943

Etty Hillesum's letter about the preparations for the transport of August 24, 1943, (the night preceding the actual departure in the morning) is a precious part of the mosaic of memories about transit camp Westerbork. It is not the only testimony; inmate Philip Mechanicus wrote about the same transport. Both testimonies picture the events on that feverish night and morning in August. Etty Hillesum writes, "I walk past scenes that loom up before my eyes in crystal-clear detail and at the same time seem like blurring age-old visions." Reality seems unreal. Will the outside world ever understand this reality? There is no time to contemplate that; things must be written down at once. Etty Hillesum writes about the Westerbork authorities – the *Grüne Polizei*, commander Gemmeker, secretary Heinz Todtman, *Oberdienstleiter* Kurt Schlesinger – but even more about the women and girls who prepare for transport. A world of helplessness and despair, but also one of hope and courage. Hillesum pictures women from all walks of life in all kinds of circumstances. A crippled girl who has just learned to walk ("Such a shame, is it not, that everything you learned in your life has been to no purpose."); a little woman in the washhouse who is desperate about her ill child and her laundry that will not be dry in time; a young mother trying to hearten her child ("If you do not behave yourself, mummy will not take you along with her!"); an "affectionate little working woman from Rotterdam" whose labor pains begin on the stretcher on the way to the train, so that at the very last moment she ends up in the infirmary; "my little hunchbacked Russian woman (...) spun in a web of sorrow" ("Surely God will understand my doubts in a world like this?"); a young woman who, in spite of having been mistreated in the Westerbork prison barracks, seems so vigorous and independent ("The child died over here; perhaps I will find my husband back"); a very old lady with an "aristocratic forehead and snow-white, wavy, highly pinned up hair" who lost her husband in the camp ("Yes, I was not allowed to lie in a grave beside my husband"); a one-time fashionable woman who stares at people "with a veiled, tentative gaze, like some defenseless and abandoned young animal"; and "the tough little ghetto woman" who is packing for herself and her children: "What about it? I've got seven children, and they need a proper mum on

their side.” Etty Hillesum is clearly impressed with this woman, repeating this sentence in her letter: “What about it? I’ve got seven children, and they need a proper mum on their side.”

Hillesum’s testimony is more extensive than Mechanicus’ account in his diary about this transport. According to Jelke Driehuis her text is also more personal and emotional. She seems to be looking for something, for the thing that defines a human being as a human being. She describes gestures, gazes, actions and utterances that make people human, uplifted from their own little egos. In describing “the tough little ghetto woman” she not only spotlights a nameless individual, she also shows the grandeur of the seemingly small and trivial. The ghetto woman’s husband and two of her sons have already been “sent on”, but she is not discouraged by that. “She bustles about, she’s busy, she packs, she has a kind word for everyone who goes by. A small, ugly ghetto woman with greasy black hair, dumpy and short legged. She wears a shabby, dark dress with short sleeves, which she must have worn behind the washtub back in Jodenbreestraat in Amsterdam. And now she is off to Poland in the same old dress, a three day journey, with seven children.” Theologian Melissa Raphael recognizes the typical Jewish Mama from the Eastern European shtetl in Hillesum’s description of the “tough little ghetto woman”: the Jewish Mama as a symbol of vigor and responsibility, of divine providence. Indeed the effect of some of Hillesum’s imagery is very powerful; she zooms in on nameless people and tries to sketch the core of their lives in just a few lines. However, she clearly does not meet only brave and beaming people. There is helplessness, desperation, passivity. Already in her First Westerbork Letter she writes that people are numbed and hardened by the nerve-racking circumstances in the camp. The situation in the camp cannot be coped with and makes people say, “We don’t want to think, we do not want to feel, it is probably best to become blunt against all misery.” Hillesum sees this as a danger, but she hopes that we have “other faculties other than reason” to comprehend the incomprehensible. Yes, she wants to believe that for every event we have a faculty that helps us deal with it.



X.  
BODY

## 28.

*When the alarm clock went off I greeted the last morning of the year with a “darn!” What a godless start. And stomach ache. And this thought: blast, having to stay up until midnight when I am so tired already. But that sort of thing is no longer decisive. “In the old days” I would have immediately judged the whole of my life by this single uncomfortable moment. Menstruation does indeed have a drastic effect on the psyche, at least in my case.*

31 December 1941

*And now there is so much more to write, but it will not come because of that damned belly, excuse my language. This time it’s really bad. Which also explains my odd behavior last night; everything’s due to that belly. My chemical composition suddenly changes, and I do not feel responsible for that any longer. The strangest processes ferment inside me during those few days of changed blood circulation. And there are also sudden bursts of creativity, but above all there is despair, a lot of despair because I will never be able to express any of the many vague and unclear things inside me.*

22 April 1942

*Even so, the body is part of you, and – even in its moments of discomfort – gives rise to moods and perceptions that ultimately enrich you. The days just before menstruation always differ sharply from other days. It’s just as if my makeup is quite different and my mental processes, too, work quite differently – wilder, more fanciful, less inhibited on one hand – more sluggish, slower and with a great underlying sadness on the other.*

24 April 1942

“Grasping the Physical Nettle” (*Ernst maken met de dingen van het lichaam*) is the title of Erna Rijper’s thesis about the body in Etty Hil-

lesum's texts.<sup>19</sup> It is worth discussing the subject of "body" in her works because physical experiences play an important role in Etty Hillesum's consciousness-raising process. Etty Hillesum writes about her body quite often, especially about the discomfort which presents itself all the time. She has a precarious health and her aspirin consumption is remarkable. Not only does she write about her ailments, big and small, she also writes about the phenomena surrounding the "menstruation hassle". While writing in her diary she discovers in increasing detail how her physical cycle parallels her psychological ups and downs. Indeed, she regularly observes that her menstruation "has a drastic effect on the psyche". She feels that "in the old days" this single uncomfortable moment overpowered her; suddenly she would look at her life in terms of her physical discomfort. At such moments she had a gloomy if not pitch black view on life. Even while writing in her diary she sometimes falls into despondency and feels she is reliving her own Dark Ages. However, writing does help her to recognize the effect of her menstrual cycle on her frame of mind. It gives her a chance to keep feelings of discomfort and mood changes aloof, shortly before and after her menstruation: "In an hour's time it can all be quite different, I know. Particularly in this precarious state when my lower anatomy is in ferment." But at times it is more than she can take: "there is so much more to write, but it will not come because of that damned belly, excuse my language. This time it's really bad."

According to Etty Hillesum her "chemical composition" can suddenly change, in which case she no longer vouches for herself. "The strangest processes ferment inside me during those few days of changed blood circulation." This changed blood circulation sets free all kinds of things, from sudden bursts of creativity to moments of despair: will she ever be able to express the things that live inside her? Her premenstrual and menstrual episodes are characterized by restlessness, fatigue and im-

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<sup>19</sup> Cfr. Erna Rijper, *'Ernst maken met de dingen van het lichaam': Een onderzoek naar lichamelijke in het leven van Etty Hillesum aan de hand van de woordbeschrijvingen 'mond', 'vermoeidheid', 'menstruatie', 'schaamte'*, Utrecht, 2002 (Master's thesis, University of Humanistic Studies).



balance. At the same time she observes that her sexual lust increases. "It is on such days that I have a desire for physical contact, but it is suddenly dawning on me that I should not give way to that urge on such days, because this desire for contact is born solely out of physical need, and for a woman's yearning that is not enough, it really is not." At the end of the same paragraph she writes, "And that rotten restlessness leads you up the garden path, and there must come a time when you are no longer fooled by it all the time." Her libido can be very powerful: "Suddenly the flesh, and only the flesh, wanted all lust to be summoned up from its deepest depths. That does not happen to me all that often, but when it does, it does not matter who the man is." In her sexual relationship with Han Wegerif such thoughts about her own body play a role as well, complicated by her continually surfacing sexual desire for Spier. Hillesum tries to separate her feelings for these two men and decides that in her own way she is faithful to Han Wegerif. Her relationship with Spier is a story of its own, in which the body again plays an important role. When Julius Spier lives like an absolute ascetic for a while, Hillesum finds that very hard, especially in her premenstrual days. "He is busy developing into something of a saint while my desire keeps growing, giving me a feeling of doom and despair." She tries to free herself from this despair, but she has a feeling that never before has she been so obsessed by a physical desire – "or was it as bad at other times?" She tries to control her erotic impulses and actually succeeds in doing so. A day later she writes, "All emotions, all passion, desire, rebelliousness, etc., have ebbed away into conciliatory fatigue, have subsided into this aguish touch of flu." Menstruation itself is coupled with the washing away of all feelings of stress and always gives her a feeling of relief.

For Hillesum things are clear: "The body is part of it all." The more stressful times can also be moments of improvement. She has a female body which supplies her with moods and sensations that are very valuable to her. She thinks a lot about the fact that her premenstrual body has an altogether different composition. She observes that at moments like that her mental processes are "wilder, more fanciful, less inhibited" though at the same time "more sluggish, slower and with a great underly-

ing sadness”. In one of her musings she writes that she once thought, in a rash and lazy mood, of having her womb removed. After all she does not want to have children; “why then undergo this senseless monthly spectacle, with all the burdens that go along with it”. Through writing her diary and through her therapeutic disciplining, her attitude towards her body changes: “After all you have to accept yourself as you were created, and you simply can’t say that it’s nothing but a nuisance. It is such a mysterious thing, this interaction of body and soul.”

## 29.

*I will have to make a careful record of my moods again; once more things are getting out of hand. And it is a bit excessive that it takes nothing but a simple cold to make my outlook of life pitch black again.*

23 August 1941

*When I feel wretched physically, I ought to stop my thought machine, but actually it begins to work extra hard at times like these, disparaging everything that can be disparaged. In any case, it would only be common sense to go to bed now; I really do feel rather ill.*

23 August 1941

*My health is just like a spoilt and sullen child. I have always paid too much attention to it, with the result that the spoilt child was demanding more and more attention.*

1 October 1941

*I used to think that headaches, stomach aches, rheumatism and similar disagreeable conditions were just physical, but now I can see in myself that they have a psychological backdrop. Body and soul are very much one in my case. The moment my soul is faltering, my body will share its fate. That is why hygiene of the soul is so terribly important for me.*

5 October 1941

Etty Hillesum sees a strong interaction between body and mind: “Body and soul are very much one in my case.” Her observations also reveal a good sense of humor and perspective, like her finding it “a bit excessive that it takes nothing but a simple cold to make my outlook of life pitch black again”. Thereupon she encourages herself to register her moods in detail again, as that might bring some useful insights. There are also times when she gives herself a good talking-to, imposing rules of conduct. One of these rules is to stop her “thought machine” when feeling physically wretched. When she does not feel well, she really should not

think. She realizes that in practice she always does the opposite when feeling miserable, thinking more intensely and more often than ever, disparaging everything that can be disparaged. In the chapter about discipline we have seen how she tries to arm herself against this 'zerdenken', this destructive brooding.

About the interaction between body and mind Etty Hillesum often quotes Julius Spier. Her conversations with Spier have a liberating effect on her. He says exactly the things that enable her to get back on the rails and continue her journey. She feels that his diagnosis of her general condition often hits the mark, like the day when he told Hillesum, "You look like you have not relieved yourself for a couple of days." This remark triggers Etty Hillesum to write in her diary, "Isn't nice to have a friend who can read such poetic things in your face. He was right, too, the darling; in body and soul I was once again completely constipated." Later that evening they make love, and the next day Hillesum feels extremely well: "I rid myself of a thousand petty things last night. And this morning in the bathroom I washed in cold water again and did all my exercises and prayed again on the brown coconut matting. I do not feel cold anymore either, despite the thick layer of snow; the stove hasn't even been lit. I can cope with life again."

It is not always her body which triggers the interaction between body and mind. At one point Hillesum observes that many of her ailments have a "psychological backdrop", meaning that much of her physical discomfort is caused by her state of mind. Especially "physical, disagreeable conditions" like headaches, stomach aches and rheumatism are a result of psychological incongruity: "The moment my soul is faltering, my body will share its fate." That is why "hygiene of the soul" is so terribly important for Hillesum. One of the most important techniques to combat the faltering of her soul is a form of psychological self-control by letting go of unpleasant thoughts and feelings, "not preserving any negative moments". Hillesum explains it to herself, "What I mean is: one must not let oneself be completely disabled by just one thing; no matter how bad it is, the great stream of life should always continue to flow."

## 30.

*I have a feeling that I'm saving a human life. No, that's preposterous: to save a human life by doing my utmost to keep it from living. I want to keep someone out of this vale of misery. I shall leave you in a state of safe unbornness, nascent being, and you ought to be grateful to me. I almost feel a little tenderness for you. I assault you with hot water and gruesome instruments, I will fight you patiently and relentlessly until you have dissolved into nothingness, and then I shall feel that I have performed a good deed, that I have done a sensible thing.<sup>20</sup> After all, I can't give you enough strength, and there are too many dangerous diseases roaming around in my defective family.*

6 December 1941

*And I shouldn't forget to mention that this morning at 6 o'clock the unborn child was born. It was just ten days old.*

8 December 1941

On December 4, 1941, Etty Hillesum has new belly complaints: "And now that tummy again." This time it seems to be something else than upcoming menstruation, as she continues, "How many doctors and waiting rooms have not I seen in my imagination these last few days, how many pills have not I swallowed and how many agonies have not I suffered..." Etty Hillesum is worried, not about her menstruation but about a possible pregnancy. To calm herself down she copies a simple maxim in her diary, "The fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself." She thinks that she should not let herself be deterred by "this defective blood circulation"; she should work, not brood or nag. She heartens herself; "What matters is not to allow my whole life to be dominated by what is going on inside me right now. It has to be a secondary thing one way or another."

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<sup>20</sup> In Pomerans' translation the phrases "I assault you with..." and "I shall fight you patiently and relentlessly..." have been replaced by "I assault myself with..." and "I shall fight patiently and relentlessly...". (Translator's note)

And on the same day: “In a situation which is always a bit awkward, I perceive that I’m determined not to let it get me down.” She gives an impression that she has been through this before, that she has been pregnant before, perhaps more than once.

Etty Hillesum feels that in this situation of unwanted pregnancy, “even though we (women) are left with the mess”, she should remain fair towards men. She refers to Han Wegerif as “touching Dad Han” who brings her bowl of hot water to the bathroom. “We have to go through this together, but when I’m irritable I must not take it out on him.” When she awakes the next morning she feels this heavy-heartedness, this utter blackness of mood. After all, it is “no trifling matter” to carry a human being inside of you that you do not want to be born. The next passage is about Hillesum’s decision to leave this nascent being “in a state of safe unbornness” and her efforts to let it dissolve into nothingness. She writes, perhaps to the astonishment of many readers, that in combating the birth of this child she has a feeling that she has performed a good deed, that she has done a sensible thing. Her writing these words is brought about by recent events concerning her youngest brother Mischa. “When Mischa got totally confused the other day and I witnessed the whole pandemonium of him being carried off to an institution by force, I swore that I would never allow such an unhappy human being to ever spring from my womb.” Etty Hillesum feels that there are too many dangerous diseases roaming around in her defective family. She is as frightened as she is determined. “Just so long as it doesn’t all drag on too long, as that frightens me terrifically. It’s only just been a week, and already I am exhausted by all measures. But no matter what, I will bar your admission to life, and believe me, you will not have any regrets about that.” Etty Hillesum feels she is “saving a human life”.

She mentions the actual abortion on Monday, December 8, 1941, almost as an aside, after a report about a private concert on Sunday, December 7, 1941: “And I shouldn’t forget to mention that this morning at 6 o’clock the unborn child was born. It was just ten days old.” She goes on to say that for Käthe Fransen, Wegerif’s German housekeeper, it was a more important adventure than for her. And “Han, sweet quiet Han later

confessed that he had been a lot more nervous than he had let on to me.” Thereafter, the birth of the unborn child is hardly expanded upon; however, on the same day she has an experience she can hardly describe. Dozing away on the divan she has, for one split second, “an inexpressible feeling of well-being, as if there are no abysses left.” She tries to describe this brief moment of perfect peace, but “I can’t describe it, damn it, I can’t describe it. I woke up and yet was not fully awake. For a moment it was as if all the heaviness had fallen away, and life was so indescribably good and light to bear; it seemed sheer surface, a shiny, bright, wide plane under which nothing moved, where there were no hidden depths. It was almost like a minor vision.” And on the last day of the same month Hillesum writes, “This, too, is one of my latest achievements: the realization that every moment gives birth to a new moment, full of fresh potential, and sometimes like an unexpected, new gift.” For us the word “birth” gets a special undertone in this passage. The physical birth of the dead embryo seems to be connected to the birth of a new moment, a new gift. In other words, the physical birth of the dead child seems to be connected to Hillesum’s own psychological birth and growth, her “being born in true, inner independence”.

XI.  
LOVE



## 31.

*He says that love for mankind is more beautiful than love for one person; for when you love one person you are merely loving yourself.*

*He is a mature 55 year old man and has reached the stage where he loves mankind, having loved many individuals in the past. I am an ordinary 27 year old girl, and I too am filled with love for mankind, but I wonder if I will not always be looking for one man. And I wonder to what extent that is a limitation, a woman's limitation, to what extent it's an ancient tradition from which she must liberate herself. Perhaps it is so much part of her very core that she would be doing violence to herself if she bestowed her love on all mankind instead of on a single man.*

4 August 1941

*Where do we stand, S. and myself? When one day my mind is clear about this relationship, it will be clear about my relationship with all men and with all mankind, to put it melodramatically.<sup>21</sup>*

4 August 1941

*On meeting a man I always gauge his sexual possibilities. I believe this to be a bad habit that must be eradicated.*

4 August 1941

Etty Hillesum sees herself as a woman who is “erotically receptive in all directions”, both for men and for women. She feels strongly attracted to Julius Spier, but also to women like Liesl Levie and Swiep van Wermeskerken. Han Wegerif is her steady lover. In her diary Etty Hillesum regularly tackles the tension between her volcanic sexual desires and her longing for a purer kind of friendship or love. “You would actually be better off as a streetwalker or a genuine saint. You'd be at peace with yourself and know exactly what you were up to. My ambivalence is real-

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<sup>21</sup> In Pomerans' translation this passage is erroneously turned around: “If I want to be clear about this relationship, then I must first clarify my relationship with all men and with all mankind.”

ly bad. Years ago I wrote in my girlish diary, ‘On the one hand I would like to make my life strong and pure and clean; on the other hand I could sleep with the very first man I meet in the street.’ And that is still how it is, really. I know that tomorrow I will do my face and dress myself as seductively as I can, and that I will then tell him that all I want is a pure and proper friendship. Yet even as I say that, serious though I may be, I will long for him to squeeze me to death in his arms. That’s how I feel about it now.” From the start Hillesum’s contact with Julius Spier disturbs her peace of mind. For pages on end she contemplates her relationship with him, confronting herself with her contradictory feelings and thoughts; she is frequently plagued by erotic desires and fantasies. It is clear that the attraction is mutual; Hillesum is equally disturbing Spier’s peace of mind, for Spier’s fiancée, Hertha Levie, is waiting for him in London. Hillesum for her part wants to be faithful to Han Wegerif, in her own way, which does not exclude any kind of relationship with Spier. Hillesum and Spier’s relationship goes through several stages, and physical contact is part of it. When Spier wants to abstain from sexual activities for some time, Hillesum is very irritated. Spier’s celibacy, she writes, drives her mad; at the same time she tells herself to overcome her own craving. She really does submerge herself in her longing for Spier, not once but regularly. She thinks she should let go of him; “in fact a relationship is nothing other than continually leaving each other, only to meet again more intensely on a higher plane.” For Hillesum this higher plane is love with a capital letter, Love for mankind. She embraces Spier’s idea “that love for mankind is more beautiful than love for one person; for when you love one person you are merely loving yourself.” She thinks she should let go of her love for this one man, but she finds it so hard.

In her relationship with Spier Etty Hillesum learns a lot about herself. Inspired by Spier’s spiritual notion of love she sets up the task for herself to attain the same kind of “love for all mankind”. This can only be achieved by a process of letting go. “You must be able to take the inner step to put no pressure on people.” Pondering over that she wonders whether or not her being a woman stands in the way. Is it not true that as

a woman she will always want that one man? Will she not always be looking for that one man? Is she, being a woman, stuck to this ancient tradition from which she must liberate herself? Or is it “so much part of her very core that she would be doing violence to herself if she bestowed her love on all mankind instead of on a single man”? It is hard, very hard. Quite possibly, she argues, the true, inner emancipation of women still has to come. “We are not yet full human beings; we are mere females, being tied down and entangled in centuries-old traditions. We still have to be born as human beings; that is the great task that lies before us women.” As soon as she is born as a human being the gate is open to love all mankind. She sees her relationship with Julius Spier as a good training. “When one day my mind is clear about this relationship, it will be clear about my relationship with all men and with all mankind, to put it melodramatically.” In her relationship with Spier she also observes to what extent she is exploring the sexual potential. “On meeting a man I always gauge his sexual possibilities. (...) Maybe he got over that, though he, too, has to fight his erotic impulses where I am concerned.” She finds it a bad habit that must be eradicated; she is continually calling herself to order on all fronts. She tells herself to get over this fixation on Spier, “Yes, we women, we foolish, idiotic, illogical women, we all seek Paradise and the Absolute. And yet my brain, my perfectly capable brain, tells me that there are no absolutes, that everything is relative, endlessly diverse, and in eternal motion, and thus fascinating and attractive, but also very, very sad. We women want to perpetuate ourselves in a man. Yes, I want him to tell me, ‘Darling, you are the only one, and I shall love you for evermore.’ That is an illusion.” As if to back herself up in the thought that such an exclusive love affair is not worth striving for, she quotes – who else – Spier. “He said that many people hold to the ideal of one man and one woman living for each other alone, completely wrapped up in each other and in their love for each other. But we consider that a limitation; it stops any influx from without. People feed on each other, and in the long run that is bound to lead to aridity; when love for all mankind is not involved in some way or another, it eventually will lead to aridity and limitation.”

## 32.

*In many different ways my primal physicality has been wedged away and weakened by a process of spiritualization, and at times I almost feel embarrassed for this spiritualization. What is primal in me is my warmth; I have a sort of primal love and primal compassion for people, for all people. I do not think I am cut out for one man or even the love of one man. Sometimes I even almost find it a bit childish, only loving one person. I could never be faithful to one man; not because of other men, but because I myself am made up of so many people.*

6 October 1941

*Oh, men, men! With your petty possessive instincts. Max, who after ten years more or less asked me to swear an oath, whether I had always been faithful to him; and Klaas, who begged for just one night. And Han, who now and then feels compelled to get worked up about my "Past". On Saturday afternoon I just crept into Han's bed, when a grin suddenly spread across his smooth face, and he said, "You really are shameless, aren't you. First you go out with your old 'Seducer' and now you seduce me."*

16 March 1942

*Is something developing between Liesl and me? These last few days it has occurred to me that one day, in some uncontrolled and passionate gesture that I have never known myself make to a woman but that I have in me all the same, I shall draw her slender body to mine. And I do not know what I shall do with it then. It feels as if this gesture has been building up in me lately.*

11 June 1942

There are many sides to Hillesum's thinking about love. Her libido is not exactly monogamous and quite powerful. Its great adversary is her equally powerful craving for spiritualization. Sometime after beginning her diary Etty Hillesum observes in herself a process of spiritualization, wedg-

ing away and weakening her primitive physicality. She continues, “What is primal in me is my warmth; I have a sort of primal love and primal compassion for people, for all people.” She then philosophizes that she is not cut out for one man, even finding it a bit childish to just love one person. When she cannot be faithful to one man, it is not because of other men but because she herself is “made up of so many people”. This thought appears to be nothing but an aside, but in fact it touches the core of ETTY HILLESUM. It is through and in her feelings of love that she finds she is made up of so many people. “I am 27 now and it feels as if I have had my fill of loving and being loved. I feel very old. It is probably no coincidence that the man with whom I’ve been living like husband and wife for the past five years is of an age that precludes any common future, and that my best friend plans to marry a girl in London. I do not think my path will be one man and one love. However, I do have a strong erotic temperament and a great need for caresses and tenderness.”

From the beginning the reader of the diary is confronted with HILLESUM’s erotic temperament and susceptibility. In her first entry she claims to be erotically subtle and seasoned enough to be taken as a fine lover, significantly adding that “love seems perfect enough like it is, but even so it remains a bit of fiddling round the core; deep inside me something is still locked away.” This fiddling has gained her quite a number of lovers, but after a meeting with her former boyfriend Klaas Smelik she concludes that this kind of life was not always sensible. “What have I learned? That I used to toy with men in the past.” Sometimes HILLESUM seems to look at her (former) lovers from a distance. “Oh, men, men! With your petty possessive instincts.” She tries to rid herself from these possessive instincts; she tries to practice a more universal kind of love. “In reality, people are full of petty jealousy and egocentricity, have the urge to dominate and to assert themselves, to be the only one and push everyone else out of the way. And their lives are made the poorer for it.” In her own way she goes to battle against this impoverishment. In training herself in universal love – not one man but mankind – she tries to break through the habit of fiddling in love, reaching for the core. Even though she observes that her “primitive physicality has been wedged

away and weakened by a process of spiritualization”, her practicing universal love does not mean that she wants to abolish the body and the erotic. Sexuality becomes more of a secondary thing, and in some situations even subservient to a very universal kind of love. Take her “love for mankind” in Westerbork, which had a remarkably physical aspect. “I have broken my body like bread and shared it out among men. And why not, they were hungry and had gone without it for so long.” In this unusual (and often missed) variation of the Christian story of the Last Supper (“Take this and eat; this is my body”), Hillesum solves the old question of God versus the lower part of the body (“it is difficult to be on equally good terms with God and the lower part of your body”) in her own unique way.

In Westerbork Etty Hillesum is also reunited with the female friend she loves most, Liesl Levie, who is four years her senior. From her diary we know that Hillesum sometimes gets confused on seeing the frail figure of this Jewish mother of two, at the time married to Werner Levie, financial director of the Amsterdam theater *Hollandsche Schouwburg*. Still in Amsterdam, Hillesum wonders at some point what it is exactly that is going on between Liesl and herself. She feels strongly attracted to her and even dreams about Liesl: “A few nights ago I dreamed very erotically, even sexually, about her, and woke up with an orgasm. Do I really want that or not? I don’t have any theories about it, and the only thing that really matters is that I genuinely love her.” She does not see the occasional erotic element as something which defines their relationship; she does not want to see it as a problem but as “one of life’s special little gifts, these (...) moments that are really more poetic than anything, and that are nobody’s business.”<sup>22</sup> Later she will describe Liesl as “a small elf; a moonlight bather on warm summer nights”. At the same time she describes this small elf’s power. “(She) also cleans spinach for three hours a day and queues for potatoes to the point of passing out. And little sighs escape her at times, sighs that start deep down inside her and make

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<sup>22</sup> In Pomerans’ translation this passage reads, “(...) moments that are really more poetic than to do with anyone in particular”. This is a misinterpretation of Hillesum’s phrase (“waar niemand iets mee te maken heft”), which really does mean it is nobody’s business. (Translator’s note)

her frail body tremble from head to toe. She seems cloaked in shyness and chastity, although the facts of her life do not sound altogether chaste, and at the same time there is something powerful, an original force of nature in her." Hillesum sees Liesl as the only female friend she has. At a later stage she writes, "Liesl is a great woman, a truly great woman; I would like to write about her one day."

## 33.

*I should write again about the love, a truly higher sort of love I have in me, also in my striving to be as fair as possible in judging my fellow men, but the word 'love' is wearing a bit thin. Or so I suddenly think. And that too is back again: lacking the courage to descend to oneself, to one's deeper, more primitive feelings. Thinking it is sentimental, afraid that others may consider it sentimental. But it is not sentimental at all. These are the two great, basic feelings deep inside of me: love, an inexplicable love, which perhaps cannot be analyzed because it is such a primitive feeling; love for creatures and for God or for what I call God; and compassion, a boundless compassion that can suddenly cause tears to spring to my eyes.*

*Indeed, love and compassion. Be economical and sparing with these concepts. At least with the theory and the words you use. For the rest, you may live as you like. But then again: mockery, a keen mind, analytical reason, cynicism, doubt, uncertainty.*

30 November 1941

*It is the only way one can live nowadays, with all-embracing love for one's tortured fellow creature, regardless of their nation, race or creed.*  
Letter to Maria Tuinzing, end of July 1943

*More and more I am inclined to the idea that love for everyone who may cross your path, love for everyone made in God's image, must rise above love for blood relatives. Please do not get me wrong. People say it's unnatural... I see that it is still far too difficult for me to write about, though so simple to live it.*

Letter to Han Wegerif and others, after August 18, 1943

According to the French novelist and philosopher Sylvie Germain, Hil-lesum's experience and ideas about love pass through three stages: *Eros*,



*Philia* and *Agape*.<sup>23</sup> She sees Eros in “the passionate love which could set Etty Hillesum ablaze for years”. *Philia* is the friendship that develops from this; the friendship à la Aristotle “in the most sublime sense”, which rejoices without any self-interest about other people’s lives. *Agape* is love or charity in the evangelical sense, Hillesum’s indiscriminate love in a later stage. According to Sylvie Germain, Etty Hillesum fully underwent these three aspects of love during her short life. This point of view certainly makes sense, as long as we do not use it too rigidly, as long as we do not try to turn Hillesum into a saint. Etty Hillesum’s notes show that she increasingly uses the words love and compassion in combination with each other, observing in herself a kind of primal love and primal compassion. At one point she wonders what they are, those “two great, basic feelings” inside of her. It is love, she writes, “an inexplicable love, which perhaps cannot be analyzed because it is such a primitive feeling; love for creatures and for God or for what I call God; and compassion, a boundless compassion that can suddenly cause tears to spring to my eyes.” So it is not just love “for creatures” but also “for God or for what I call God”. What strikes us is the number of times that Hillesum mentions Paul’s famous words about love in 1 Corinthians 13; it is a text that comforts her. In difficult situations, especially when she is trying to let go of her fixation for Julius Spier, she looks up this passage. On February 27, 1942, again to avert her craving for Spier, she copies part of the text: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. (...) Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil.”<sup>24</sup> She goes on to explain the way this passage affects

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<sup>23</sup> Cfr. Sylvie Germain, *Etty Hillesum*, (Chemins d’Éternité: Collection dirigée par Olivier Germain-Thomas), Paris, Pygmalion/Gérard Watelet, 1999

<sup>24</sup> Using the King James translation as it is the English counterpart of the Dutch Statenvertaling that Etty Hillesum used, I took the liberty to replace “charity” with “love”. That is in line with

her, how it has a tremendous impact on her. “And when I read these words, I felt as if... Yes, as if what? I cannot yet express it properly. They worked on me like a dowsing-rod that touched the rock bottom of my heart, causing hidden sources to spring up suddenly within me. All at once I was down on my knees beside the little white table and all my released love flowed through me again, momentarily purged of desire, envy, spite, etc. But I believe I was quite hysterical yesterday afternoon.” Initially the Paul passage works like an antidote when Hillesum is suffering from serious attacks of possessive love. With this text she tries to rid herself from “the wrong kind of love, self-centered love, love that wants to possess”. By regularly reading and taking in this text she feels “released love” flowing through her, a kind of love that gets broader all the time and becomes the center point of her view of the world. Her First Westerbork Letter ends with a reference to Paul’s concept of love.

In the course of writing, Etty Hillesum increasingly mentions a love that is “all-embracing and broad”. Relationships with the people around her improve, including the relationship with her family, especially her mother. “Mother. Suddenly a wave of love and compassion that washes away all the petty irritations. Five minutes later, of course, I am irritated again.” Etty Hillesum tries hard, but it is a process of trial and error. “I feel I am growing, I am aware of my faults and my pettiness each new day, but I also know my potential. And I really do love; I love a few good friends, but that love is not a fence erected against others; my love is far-flung, all-embracing and broad, even including those of whom I’m really not all that fond. And that is what I should strive for.” Hillesum persistently tries to continue on her way to a “love for mankind”. In Westerbork she seems to hold on to this universal love. In July 1943 she writes from Westerbork to her friend Maria Tuinzing that “all-embracing love for one’s tortured fellow creature, regardless of their nation, race or creed” is the only way one can live nowadays. A couple of weeks later she writes to the home front that she is more and more in-

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Etty Hillesum’s dealings with the passage and with the Dutch translation she uses; moreover the word ‘love’ is used in most other English Bible translations. In the Greek original Paul uses the word *αγαπη* (*agape*), a notion discussed in the beginning of this paragraph. (Translator’s note)

clined to the idea “that love for everyone who may cross your path, love for everyone made in God’s image, must rise above love for blood relatives”. But she is also afraid in this letter that her friends in Amsterdam will not fully appreciate her words, because she adds, “Please do not get me wrong. People say it’s unnatural... I see that it is still far too difficult for me to write about, though so simple to live it.” However, this simplicity is under stress; a couple of days later, in her letter about the transport of August 24, 1943, she writes how shocked she was by the faces of the *Grüne Polizei*. “My God, those faces! I looked at them, each in turn, from behind the safety of a window, and I have never been so frightened of anything in my life. I struggled with the words that have been the guiding principle of my life, that God made man after His likeness.” Her view of all-embracing love is liable to be pushed aside. What about love for everyone who may cross your path if their sole aim is destruction? In the same testimony she writes that she is trying to look at the faces and figures of those green-uniformed men without any prejudice. She writes that she is transfixed with horror. “Rude, sneering faces, in which one seeks in vain for even the slightest trace of human warmth.” Still, in a letter she writes to Maria Tuinzing, ten days after witnessing these horrors, she does not let go of her ideas of life, love and God. “The suffering has marked us for a whole lifetime, and yet life in its intangible depths is so wonderfully good, Maria; I have to come back to that time and again. As long as we make sure that God is in safe hands with us despite everything, Maria.”

XII.  
LIFE

## 34.

*When I sat in the corner leaning against S.'s pearwood bookcase, that threatening literary temple, I felt life coursing through me as haltingly and falteringly as a river wending its laborious way around piled-up boulders barring its progress. And I so longed for life to be a single pure, flowing, warming stream.*

5 October 1941

*So this is my attitude to life at the moment: it flows through me as a great, rich, mighty river, fed by an infinite number of small tributaries – etc.*

27 March 1942

*Does that mean I am never sad, that I never rebel, always acquiesce, and celebrate life no matter what the circumstances? No, far from it. I believe that I know and share all the feelings of sadness and resistance that a human being can experience, but I never cling to them; I do not prolong such moments. They pass through me, like life itself, as a broad, eternal stream; they become part of that stream, and life continues.*

28 March 1942

Where was it that it all began? You could say, with a blocked soul and “a creepy character wearing some sort of antenna on his head”, who puts her on the road of self-realization and stimulates Etty Hillesum to dare and make the giant leap into the cosmos. “Become who you are!” After her initial skepticism she likes to be taken by his hand. At last there is someone who can help her rid herself of her inner chaos. Hillesum takes Spier’s advice to heart and starts working on herself. Soon she finds that the discipline really works miracles for her, that her blocked soul gets more and more unblocked. She starts feeling better, more flowing and calmer. This has to do both with her physical discipline (enough sleep, washing with cold water, daily exercises) and with her mental discipline (daily

contemplation, reading and writing). It is by writing down what she thinks and feels, a continuous psychological self-confrontation, that she creates inner space. When writing in her “mud book” she can rid her mind of all kinds of waste products. Transferring her mind to the “blue lines” has a chastening effect. She writes down all her feelings, great and small. On rereading her exercise books she is often filled with shame (“I must admit that at times I’m embarrassed by that schoolgirlish nonsense”), but she also has the feeling that she has come to something essential, “the great stream of life”.

Etty Hillesum keeps listening to her own rhythm and tries to live in accordance with that rhythm. In spite of all the psychological obstacles she succeeds in clearing up the inner rubble to such an extent that she can make more and more contact with the underflow inside her. Increasingly she mentions that she is experiencing moments of inner space, of a streaming and flowing life force, of life itself passing through her “as a broad, eternal stream”. Whenever Hillesum speaks of a stream flowing within her, she feels good. Her moments of blocking are alternated with moments of unblocking, of life flowing through her. Whenever she feels calmness and space, she undergoes this stream of life, but regularly there are piled-up boulders in the way, disrupting the flow. “I felt life coursing through me haltingly and falteringly like a river wending its laborious way along piled-up boulders barring its progress. And I so longed for life to be a single pure, flowing, warming stream.” This longing for a flowing life inspires Hillesum to continue working on herself, while outside the war rages on. She does not see it as a luxury but as a necessity; the path she is following makes her stronger and mentally more capable of coping with everything that is happening around her, not in the least with the threat of destruction. While therapeutically disciplining herself she learns not to prolong negative feelings. “I believe that I know and share all the feelings of sorrow and resistance that a human being can experience, but I never cling to them, I do not prolong such moments. They pass through me, like life itself, as a broad, eternal stream; they become part of that stream, and life continues.” She used to judge the whole of her life by a single uncomfortable moment, but now she is able to put her attacks of

sadness and resistance into perspective and let them pass, allowing the stream of life to carry them along. For Ety Hillesum the words “stream” and “life” are strongly interconnected. The discovery of life within her is like the discovery of a secret well spring, an underflow which she can open up. “Life is such a strong and uninterrupted current in me; it is taking on more and more shape, filling the very foundations of my being, of my days and of my thoughts so completely that I long for nothing more than to continue like that.”

## 35.

*We have to accept death as part of life, even the most horrible of deaths.*  
2 July 1942

*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 safely and soundly 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 soon I feel that responsibility again to keep the spark of life inside me ablaze.*

21 July 1942

*I have managed to reach the life in myself while still sitting at this desk. Then suddenly, I was smacked into a center of human suffering, one of many little fronts that can be found all over Europe. And there all of a sudden I had this experience, that in the faces of people, in thousands of gestures, brief comments, and life stories, I was able to read our age – and much more than just our age. By teaching myself to read my inner self, I discovered that I could also read other people’s inner selves. It really seemed that with sensitive fingertips I touched the contours of these times and of life itself.<sup>25</sup>*

22 September 1942

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<sup>25</sup> In Pomerans’ translation sentences were left out or altered, giving this passage an altogether different meaning. In my almost verbal translation Etty Hillesum wrote, “Sitting at my desk I didn’t know how to reach life, because I had not yet reached the life in myself. I have managed to reach the life in myself while still sitting at this desk. Then suddenly, I was smacked into a center of human suffering, one of many little fronts that can be found all over Europe.” In Pomerans’ version this passage reads, “I was sitting at my desk with no idea what to make of life. That was because I had not yet arrived at the life in myself; was still sitting at this desk. And then I was suddenly flung into one of many flashpoints of human suffering.” In other words, in Pomerans’ version Etty Hillesum does not reach life in herself at all while sitting at the desk. The last part of the passage, again in my almost verbal translation, reads, “By teaching myself to read my inner self, I discovered that I could also read other people’s inner selves. It really seemed that with sensitive fingertips I touched the contours of these times and of life itself.”

Pomerans replaced the complete italicized sentence by an exclamation that cannot be found in the diary, while “the contours of these times and of life itself” was replaced by “the contours of these



The persecution of the Jews and the threat of their destruction continues to expand; Etty Hillesum feels how the net is closing around her. While her outer world is getting smaller, her inner world is growing. In the chapter about resistance we have seen that Etty Hillesum thought she should look suffering and death in the eye. She feels that “the Russian soul” knows how to suffer: do not run away from misery; do not rush into rationalizations but instead suffer “to your very depths”. If people accept what presents itself and are prepared to go through it all, to suffer, they will be strong and confident. By being frightened, running away or resigning you are not just avoiding death but life as well. Life to its fullness can only be understood, Hillesum writes, if death and suffering are granted their share. Honoring death is not a choice against but pro life: “It is living life a thousandfold from minute to minute, granting suffering its share. And it is certainly no small share these days.” Hillesum tries to put her own Russian soul into practice. That does not mean that Hillesum herself is never overtaken by feelings of despondency or panic. There are moments when she feels like giving up or giving in, but she always seems to be able to fall back on her inner strength. Acknowledging her threatened life she is also capable, or rather forced, to apply her lessons in letting go on all aspects of her life. Especially in shedding “wishes and desires and attachments” she experiences a growing vitality and writes – like we have seen in the chapter about wisdom – that she is ready “to bear witness in any situation and unto death that life is beautiful and meaningful and that it is not God’s fault that things are as they are at present, but our own”. In acknowledging death and letting go of life she experiences the fullness of life and the presence of God. Her “greatest and most continuous inner adventure” is “living her life with God and in God and having God dwell within”. However Etty Hillesum realizes that she cannot just trumpet around her testimony about God and about life being “beautiful and meaningful”, because many people around her disagree with her. Her spiritual philosophy on life must have met with resistance and irritation, because she herself mentions her own restraints in company: “I work and continue to live with the same conviction, and I find life

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times” and nothing more: “*And then it suddenly happened*: I was able to feel the contours of these times with my fingertips.” (Translator’s note)

meaningful, in spite of everything, although I hardly dare say so in company these days.” But, in her diary she does not restrain herself and writes down her tribute to life. “Living and dying, sorrow and joy, the blisters on my feet and the jasmine behind the house; the persecution, the unspeakable horrors; it is all as one in me, and I accept it all as one mighty whole and begin to grasp it better if only for myself without being able to explain to anyone else how it all hangs together. I wish I could live for a long time so that one day I may know how to explain it, and if I am not granted that wish, well, then somebody else will perhaps do it, carry on from where my life has been cut short. And that is why I must try to live my life to the fullest and with conviction till my last breath, so that those who come after me do not have to start all over again, need not face the same difficulties. Is that not doing something for future generations?”

When Etty Hillesum writes that she feels as if she were “the guardian of a precious slice of life, with all the responsibility that entails,” and that she wants to shepherd “that great and beautiful feeling for life” within her towards better times, her language reminds us of the responsibility she felt when she performed a seemingly contrary act, aborting life within her, the death of a “nascent being”. In the chapter *Body* we read about Hillesum’s decision to leave this nascent being “in a state of safe unbornness”. She wants to avoid giving birth to an unhappy life like that of her brother Mischa. Paradoxically at the day the dead embryo is being born Hillesum herself experiences life anew. “For a moment it was as if all the heaviness had fallen away and life was so indescribably good and light to bear, it seemed sheer surface, a shiny, bright, wide plane under which nothing moved, where there were no hidden depths. It was almost like a minor vision.” No feelings of guilt but feelings of relief and responsibility for life; she has rescued life and feels it flowing through her again.

Being able to read and write life. In the chapter *Testifying* we have seen Etty Hillesum’s joy when she discovers that at last she is capable of reading life. “By teaching myself to read my inner self, I discovered that I could also read other people’s inner selves.” In her eyes she

has reached life within her while still sitting at her desk, after which she was suddenly “smacked into a center of human suffering, one of many little fronts that can be found all over Europe”. During her first sojourns in Westerbork she discovers that she can also read “the faces of people, in thousands of gestures, brief comments, and life stories”. She has developed the tools she needs to express herself as a writer, and she no longer has to look for a theme. Etty Hillesum becomes a writer and a witness of life around her, of the trials and tribulations of Jewish life in transit camp Westerbork.

## 36.

*If we were to save only our bodies and nothing more from the camps all over the world, that would not be enough. What matters is not whether we preserve our lives at any cost, but how we preserve them. I sometimes think that every new situation, good or bad, can enrich us with new insights. But if we abandon the hard facts that we are forced to face, if we give them no shelter in our heads and hearts, do not allow them to settle and change into facts through which we can grow and from which we can draw meaning, then we are not a viable generation.*

First Westerbork Letter, December 1942

*Many of us here will never get over the fact that we allowed our old and our sick to go first. This is a deliberate policy based on the “self-preservation instinct”. Father asked a male nurse from the last transport, “How can people who are near death in the hospital be forced to go? Surely that’s against all medical ethics.” And the nurse answered earnestly, “The hospital gives up the corpses in order to hang on to the living.” He wasn’t trying to be facetious; he was perfectly serious.*

Last letter to Maria Tuinzing, September 2, 1943

In transit camp Westerbork there are other laws of life and death than in the thinking of Etty Hillesum. She has resolved to gather up “all the tears and abominations” in Westerbork, but she does not want to become a chronicler of “horror” or “sensation”. However, the situation in Westerbork is an “allotment of very unusual proportions”. In *Testifying* we have seen that Etty Hillesum sometimes uses the metaphor of hell for the situation in Westerbork. About the night before the transport of August 24, 1943, she writes that she said it to herself once, aloud, “Right, I’m in hell now.” Strange, absurd things are happening in this hell. In her last letter to Maria Tuinzing she writes about one of these absurd events during the last transport. It is about the great number of old and sick people that have been deported. Hillesum writes that “many of us here will

never get over the fact that we allowed our old and our sick to go first". Then she says that it is a deliberate policy based on the self-preservation instinct, and she quotes a brief conversation between her father and a male nurse. When her father says, "How can people who are near death in the hospital be forced to go? Surely that's against all medical ethics?", the nurse answers, "The hospital gives up the corpses in order to hang on to the living." And indeed this was no joke; he was dead serious. These are the laws of the camp. The logic of life and death in Westerbork and other camps is in accordance with the closed system of the Nazis; the Jews and other prisoners are set against one another. Everything is run in such a way that the prisoners are at one another's mercy; they live in a jungle where the laws of self-preservation dominate and determine life. What choice does the male nurse make? Who will he "rescue" from the transport? He has no options. Likewise, attempts to escape are immediately followed by reprisals. Hillesum writes about a confused young Jew who escaped from hospital and "in a clumsy, childish way took refuge in a tent". After a manhunt the boy is caught and a verdict is quickly passed: "Scores of others are being sent on the transport with the boy, including quite a few who had thought they were firmly at anchor here. This system happens to believe in collective punishment." It is in this hell that Etty Hillesum still sees possibilities for life. In the previous chapter we have seen that, ten days after this testimony she writes to Maria Tuinzing that life "in its intangible depths is so wonderfully good" – she simply has to "come back to that time and again".

If we go by her last writings we must conclude that Etty Hillesum sticks to her view of life. However we know nothing at all about the last days before she died. On September 7, 1943, she is rather unexpectedly deported 'to the East'. We know hardly anything about her arrival, her stay and her death in Auschwitz. At the very last moment she throws some written messages from the train. One card is for Christine van Nooten. She writes, "We left the camp singing, father and mother firmly and calmly, Mischa, too." In a letter to Maria Tuinzing Etty Hillesum's last sentence reads, "Will you wait for me?" She seemed to have kept up her

spirits. Jopie Vleeschhouwer writes about her departure from Westerbork: “And there she set foot on the “transport boulevard”, which she had described just fourteen days earlier in her own incomparable manner. Talking gaily, smiling, a kind word for everyone she met on the way, full of sparkling good humor, perhaps just a touch of sadness, but every inch our Etty, the way you all know her.” He quotes Etty Hillesum: “I have my diaries and my small Bibles and my Russian grammar and Tolstoy with me, and I have no idea what else there is in my luggage.” It is Hillesum’s last voyage. In Auschwitz it is not just her luggage that is taken from her.

With the transport to Auschwitz Etty Hillesum’s written legacy is cut short. Her testimony of “a piece of Jewish history” is about the fate of the Jews in the Netherlands, especially the Jews in Westerbork. Her two illegal letters about Westerbork are not just a journalistic report; they have clearly been written by a person who – in spite of everything – believes in life. In the late summer of 1942 she concludes that her first sojourns “behind barbed wire have been the two richest and most intense months of my life”, confirming her “highest values”. When she wonders why her spirit, far from being oppressed, seemed “to grow lighter and brighter” by Westerbork, she answers, “It is because I read a bit of these times, and they do not seem meaningless to me. Surrounded by my writers and poets and the flowers on my desk, I loved life so much. And there among the barracks, full of hunted and persecuted people, I found confirmation of my love of life. Life in those drafty barracks was no other than life in this protected, peaceful room. Not for one moment was I cut off from the life I was said to have left behind. There was simply one great, meaningful continuity.” She seems to mobilize her “inner strength” to the maximum, using it to live through the situation. A couple of days before she is made a permanent inmate, in the summer of 1943, she writes from Westerbork to the home front, “In a few days you can drift far from your former moorings, and new and powerful forces enter into you. Accepting your own doom takes inner strength.”

On July 20, 1942, Etty Hillesum writes, "I would so much like to live on to carry all the human warmth I have within me – despite everything I go through every day – into that new age. And there is only one way of preparing for the new age, by preparing it within ourselves. Somewhere in me I feel so light, without the least bitterness and so full of strength and love." In and around the barracks her love for life is confirmed, and she increasingly sees herself as a guardian of this love. In her testimonies from Westerbork she tries to interweave this love with concrete descriptions; she wants to preserve people's special moments for posterity. "And I would now and then discover in each one of these people a gesture or a glance that took them out of themselves and of which they seemed barely aware. And I felt I was the guardian of that gesture or glance." Her observations in the transit camp are made from the perspective of her faith in human warmth and in God. For her, love for life coincides with love for God. According to her one must be able to find a piece of God in every human being, a piece which should be "dug up". "And God created man after His likeness." Using that as her *Leitmotiv* Etty Hillesum wants to observe and describe the world around her. Sometimes she fails and hits the wall, like when she is confronted with the "rude, sneering faces" of the *Grüne Polizei*. In vain she seeks "for even the slightest trace of human warmth" in these faces.

Hillesum's texts are not about death but about life. Some texts are characterized by a utopian element and make an appeal to the reader. For instance, in her First Westerbork Letter she writes, "If we were to save only our bodies and nothing more from the camps all over the world, that would not be enough." She feels that after the war there will be a period of human warmth, to which she wants to contribute. In her view life is about more than just saving one's skin: "What matters is not whether we preserve our lives at any cost, but how we preserve it." She sees it as a common task to give shelter to all the misery in the camp "in our heads and in our hearts", allowing it "to settle and change into facts through which we can grow and from which we can draw meaning". She sees it as a postwar task: "It is not easy, and no doubt even less easy for us Jews

than for anyone else; yet if we have nothing to offer a desolate postwar world but our bodies saved at any cost, if we fail to draw new meaning from the deep wells of our distress and despair, then it will not be enough." Etty Hillesum feels that "every new situation, good or bad, can enrich us with new insights." New insights, created both in- and outside the camps, will have to join after the war. "New thoughts will have to radiate outward from the camps themselves, new insights, spreading lucidity, will have to cross the barbed wire enclosing us and join with the insights that people outside will have to earn just as bloodily, in circumstances that are almost as difficult as ours." While Westerbork made other people lose their faith in life, Hillesum persists in her faith in life. She feels that perhaps, after the war, "wrecked lives" may take a careful step forward "on the common basis of an honest search for some way to understand these dark events".





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