

Etty Hillesum: Body, Hands, Feet and Eyes (Part 1a: Body)

1. Introduction

My starting point is the famous prayer attributed to St Teresa of Avila¹:

Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.²

When Etty Hillesum speaks about the body and its hands, its feet and its eyes she does so in connection with reference to the events of her own life but also metaphorically in connection with reference to God and to eternity. For example, toward the end of the first of her eleven diary books she writes:

I am full of unease, a strange, infernal agitation, which might be productive if only I knew what to do with it. A 'creative' unease. Not of the **body** – not even a dozen passionate nights of love could assuage it. It is almost a 'sacred' unease. "Oh God, take me into [y]our great **hands** and turn me into [y]our instrument, let me write (*Etty*, pp. 67-68, also p. 153).

Might something be mutually learnt by bringing Teresa's prayer into proximity with what Etty has to say in her diary about the human body: its hands, its feet and its eyes? Those who know more than I about St Teresa can decide if anything might be learnt on her side. On Etty's side, body, hands, feet and eyes symbolise four important features of her life, respectively: sexuality, prayer, female independence, and her understanding of beauty inclusive of suffering.

When specifically looked for, references to the body; its hands, its feet, and its eyes, jump out everywhere from the pages of Etty's diary in over-abundance. So, in order to keep this talk to a manageable length I have had to leave out discussion of hands, feet³ and eyes and, though I will focus on

¹ Some parallels have been drawn between Etty's work and that of Teresa of Avila by Carol Lee Flinders, *Enduring Lives: Living Portraits of Women and Faith in Action* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 2013) p. 28, 42-3, 49 and by Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingener, 'The Journey of Etty Hillesum from Eros to Agape', in Klaas A.D. Smelik *et al The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill 2017) p. 72, 80. Flinders regrets that St Teresa and other female writers don't appear in Etty's canon. She also argues that a more mature Etty does not emerge until the summer of 1942 but I suggest here that the turning point to this maturity had already occurred by January 1942 and that its inspiration was in February 1941 prior to the diary being written. The second author also relates aspects of Etty's spiritual understanding to that of the writings of St. Therese of Lisieux. However, it should be noted that while Etty says she sometimes longs "for a convent cell" (*Etty*, p. 71) in order to find both peace and clarity, she also immediately notes that this is not a life she could sustain. Running off to a convent cell she adds, "Would be no great feat. It is right here, in this place, in the here and now, that I must find them [peace and clarity]. I must fling myself into reality, time and again, must come to terms with everything I meet on my path, feed the outer world with my inner world and vice versa. But it is all so terribly difficult, and I feel so heavyhearted" (*Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943 Complete and Unabridged* (ed. Klaas A. D. Smelik ET Arnold J Pomerans: Novalis, Eerdmans 2002) p. 71. All future references *Etty*, and the page number).

² I suggest that Etty 'countersigns' this prayer where 'countersigning' has a double meaning of both ascent and divergence. See Michael Naas's account of Jacques Derrida on the countersign in Michael Naas, *The Miracle and the Machine: Jacques Derrida and the Two Sources of Religion, Science and the Media* (Indiana: Bloomington 2012) pp. 260-264

³ The metaphor of 'getting a foothold' (*Etty*, pp. 73, 172, 199, 324), of standing on her own two feet (*Etty*, pp. 30, 138, 383, 487) is commonly used by Etty to express the progress of her spiritual development as does the self-disciplining 'hand'

the body here, there is too much material for a single talk – I continue the discussion of Etty on the sexual body in a separate talk.

Reference to hands in Etty's diary can be interpreted as marking a transition *from* the caressing gestures of hands held out toward the body *to* praying hands in a body posture gestured inward toward God (*Etty*, p. 92) – but this posture and gesture of prayer will be considered in Part 2 – again another talk – while eyes, and her vision of beauty, belong in Part 3; feet, representing her strong sense of female independence, will form Part 4 of this longer project.

Today, the Body, we will use Etty's last postcard by way of an introduction to her life and religious thought in section 3; then, section 4 will briefly sketch her presentation of the sexual body (to be developed in that future talk) before ending in section 5 with her account of the relation between the body and the soul in section 5.

2. Who was Etty Hillesum?

Etty Hillesum was a secular Dutch Jew who, encouraged by her therapist, the German Jewish exile, Julius Spier, wrote a diary between March 1941 and October 1942 while living in Nazi occupied Amsterdam. She refused to go into hiding. Instead, she chose to live her life the best she could to the full (*Etty*, pp. 44, 84, 111, 154, 537) despite the terrible restrictions and the horrors imposed on Jews by Nazi rule.

‘No Admittance to Jews’. More and more of these boards are appearing all over the place. Nevertheless, there is still enough room for one to move and live and be happy and play music and love each other. (*Etty*, p. 296)

Her dairy runs to 550 printed pages and there is a further 100 pages of letters most of which she sent from Westerbork Concentration Camp where Dutch Jews were interned while awaiting transit to Auschwitz. In July 1942, she had volunteered to work in the camp to help her fellow Jews as best she could and did not herself become a full-prisoner there until June 1943. At that point she could have chosen to return to Amsterdam but instead opted to share what she called “the common fate” of “we Jews”.⁴

At this point I want to share one ‘hand’ reference with you. Following the arrival of 300 people into Westerbork, Etty reports that they “stretched out their **hands** toward the bread of which there was not

metaphor of getting a grip (*Etty*, pp. 71, 99, 133, **143**, 250) on herself and on reality; both metaphors are used to express her desire to live an independent life dedicated to love and service for other people.

⁴ For a good account of Etty's concept of *massenshicksal* the Jews' common fate see Lotte Bergen, ‘Agency Within Nazi Constraints: Etty Hillesum and her Interpretation of the Jewish Fate’ in Klass A.D Smelik *et al* (ed.) *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context: Writings, Life and Influences of a Visionary Author* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2018) pp. 103-141. It could be noted that Etty speaks of this fate in letter 55 “What tens and tens of thousands before us have borne, we can also bear. For us, I think it is no longer a question of living but how one is equipped for one's extinction [*ondergang*]” (*Etty*, p. 631). But she does so in the context of attempts by her parents to join a list of those willing to offer their wealth to the Nazi's in exchange for their lives. Etty rejects this. Indeed, many of those who did join the so called Putkamer list later perished any way (*Etty*, p. 776). Also see, Gerrit Van Oord, ‘The Departure: A Reconstruction of the Unexpected Departure of the Hillesum Family Froo Camp Westerbork on Tuesday 7 September 1943’ in Klass A.D Smelik *et al* (ed.) *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context*: op. cit., pp. 170-171.

enough” (*Etty*, p. 585). In this group for whom there was insufficient bread were a number of what Etty calls “Catholic Jews” (*Etty*, p. 585)⁵ and among them Edith Stein. Etty refers to Edith and her sister as, “two nuns from that rich ... and highly talented family from Breslau with stars on their habits” (*Etty*, p. 524).

At Westerbork, Etty types letters as a secretary for its Jewish leaders, visits and supports the sick in the so called ‘hospital’ barracks where she offers a listening ear to its patients seeking to help them with practical matters such as shoe repairs (*Etty*, p. 586) or taking their letters to the camp post-office. She cares for babies, carries other people’s luggage (*Etty*, p. 602) cleans the toilet block and washes clothes with almost non-existent soap (*Etty*, p. 625), talks with the children and young people, reads the psalms, listens to the life-stories of the elderly, teaches Russian and all the while keeps people’s spirits up with a cheery demeanour. She cares for her parents by, among other things, keeping them off the transport list, reads and discusses Rilke and Meister Eckhart with some of her fellow inmates and writes letters. She also continues to keep a diary. These diary books will be burnt with her at Auschwitz. She shares a small hut with 5 room-mates who have two wooden bunk-beds between them which shake when anyone moves (*Etty*, p. 577): all this, while her body feels fatigued and troubled by eczema (*Etty*, p. 614) She writes:

“The misery here is quite terrible: and yet late at night when the day has sunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire. And then, time and again, ... like some elementary force – the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world. Against every new outrage and every fresh horror, we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness, drawing strength from within ourselves. We may suffer, but we must not succumb. And if we should survive unhurt in **body** and soul, but above all in soul, without bitterness and without hatred, then we shall have a right to a say after the war.” (*Etty*, p. 616

One further thing: at what must have been great personal risk, she helped smuggle children out of the camp into safe hiding.

3. Etty’s Last Communication

Etty’s last communication from the camp was written on a postcard in September 1943 while she was travelling in the freight wagon that transported her to Auschwitz, where she was murdered on 30th November 1943. The postcard was thrown from the freight wagon, found by a farmer and posted on. It reads:

⁵ She speaks with two of them George and Rob Lob respectively Friar Nivardus and Brother Linus and Etty names Sister Mendes da Costa (*Etty*, pp. 524 and 747 also 585) all are later murdered at Auschwitz. She refers to Edith and Rosa Stein not by name but as “two nuns from that rich, strictly orthodox and highly talented family in Breslau, with stars on their habits” (*Etty*, p. 524). Some have speculated that Etty could have known this only by having spoken to them but this has been doubted.

Christine, opening the Bible at random I find this: ‘The Lord is my high tower [*vertrek*]’. I am sitting on my rucksack in the middle of a full freight car. Father, Mother and Mischa are a few cars away. In the end, the departure came without warning. On sudden special orders from The Hague.⁶ We left the camp singing, father and mother firmly and calmly, Mischa too. We shall be travelling for three days. Thank you for all your kindness and care. Friends left behind will still be writing to Amsterdam perhaps you will hear something from them. Or from my last long letter from the camp. Good-bye for now from the four of us. Etty (*Etty*, p. 658-9. 7th Sept 1943).

That Etty chose at this moment to write to Christine shows that even in the worst of circumstances she was thinking of others. Christine lived in Deventer, where she had taught Etty Classics at school. Etty’s father, Louis, had been Headmaster of the school until forced to retire after the Nazi invasion.⁷ Christine and Louis were lovers. Etty knew the secret. Christine and Louis kept their affair secret from Etty’s mother by writing love letters to each other in ancient Greek. In Etty’s letters to Christine from Westerbork Etty informs Christine about her father’s welfare and makes humble requests for supplies to be sent from Deventer (*Etty*, p. 631). Knowing that Christine was cut off from other sources of news, Etty writes this postcard to inform Christine that her family, including her father, had left Holland, would not now need supplies and may never return. Etty’s mother and father either died on the journey or were gassed on their arrival at Auschwitz.⁸

It not clear which passage from the Bible Etty is quoting in the postcard. Suggestions include psalm 18. 3 or 61. 3. But it is also possible that she is using the passage from the Bible as a literary device. The Dutch word that Etty uses that has been translated as ‘high tower’ is *vertrek*. This word has a double meaning in Dutch. It can mean ‘inner space’ but it can also mean ‘departure’ often associated with railway platforms. So it is possible she is saying here something like: ‘As I depart, God *is* my inner space – all is right with my inner world’.

⁶ Etty refers to ‘sudden special orders from The Hague’. While Etty was at this stage a prisoner in Westerbork she was still exempt from transport. Orders had been received directly from The Hague to send the whole Hillesum family on the next transport. Initially, research suggested that Etty’s mother had written to the SS commander of the Netherland, Oberstrumfuhrer Raulter, asking for special treatment for Mischa, enraged by the audacity he had sent the special orders. This now seems unlikely. Mischa had been offered a place in a special camp for Jewish musician but had turned it down on the grounds that he did not wish to leave his parents. As a result the SS administrator dealing with this case in The Hague, one Gertrude Slotke, took it upon herself to issue the orders. But, what she understood to be a family unit of three persons Commandant Gemmeker at Westerbork interpreted as four. In the end, the decision to send Etty to Auschwitz was Gemmeker’s. For a full account of this see, Gerrit Van Oord, ‘The Departure: A Reconstruction of the Unexpected Departure of the Hillesum Family From Camp Westerbork on Tuesday 7 September 1943’ in Klass A.D Smelik et al (ed.) *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context*: op. cit., pp. 157-180.

⁷ His forced retirement by Nazi order happened in November 1940 but his official discharge occurred in March 1941 from which point the family income was drastically cut. (*Etty*, p. 141 and 700)

⁸ Etty’s youngest brother, Mischa was murdered in Auschwitz 4 months after Etty in March 1944. Jaap, her other brother, had arrived at Westerbork in September 1943, after the rest of the family had left. He died in a cattle truck in April 1945 following a partial evacuation of Bergen-Belsen.

This would be consistent with what she recognised to be her unique definition of ‘God’.⁹ She writes early in the diary:

“I have two great feelings inside: love, an inexpressible love, which perhaps cannot be analysed because it is so primitive, for creatures and for God *or what I call God*; and compassion, a boundless compassion that can sometimes cause tears to spring to my eyes” (*Etty*, p. 161 emphasis added)

Etty tells us directly on three occasions what she means by *what she calls ‘God’*. In August 1941 she writes:

“I regained contact with myself, with the deepest and best in me, which I call God, and so also [contact] with you.” (*Etty*, p. 83)

God is the deepest and best in herself and in other people and, she says:

... if your inner light switch has been turned off, [to] put it boldly, [it is] as if God had deserted you for a moment (*Etty*, p. 216 also p. 215).¹⁰

She also equates “feeling safe and secure” in God’s hands with not being “cut off quite so often from that deep undercurrent within me” (*Etty*, p. 197).

In July 1942, just before voluntarily leaving Amsterdam for Westerbork, she writes:

“When I pray I never pray for myself; always for others, or else I hold a silly, naïve or deadly serious dialogue with what is deepest inside me which for the sake of convenience I call God.” (*Etty*, p. 494)

And, in September 1943, having briefly returned from Westerbork to Amsterdam, she writes:

“There is such perfect and complete happiness in me, oh God. What he [Spier] called ‘reposing in oneself’. And that probably best expresses my own love of life, I repose in myself. And that part of myself: that deepest and richest part in which I repose is what I call ‘God’” (“(*Etty*, p. 519)

This last quote hints at the fact that what went by God’s name for Etty, also went by other names most notably here: ‘life’, but also elsewhere in the diary ‘her inner creative sources’, ‘silence’ and ‘love’ (*Etty*, p. 611).

⁹ This is a definition which does not cohere well with the view of those who would prefer her to have held a belief more suited to their own understanding of a transcendent being beyond beings this would include those, such as her Christian friend, Henny Tideman, and other women in Spier’s circle whom for Etty, “seem far too ponderous and emphatic with their ‘love’ and their God” (*Etty*, p. 161). Etty expresses her ambivalence here and a desire to be less emphatic and more sparing in the use of words like love and compassion when discussed only in theory. When she says one should have, “Love and compassion ... [in practice and] ... with the rest, you may live as you like,” (*Etty*, p. 161) she sounds very much like St Augustine saying, “love God and do as you will.” Her ambivalence to the theory of love compassion arises because she also recognises that, “mockery, keenness of intellect, analytical reason, cynicism, doubt, uncertainty” – also form part of her make-up (*Etty*, p. 161). However, despite this antipathy to the god of the Spier club, Etty later says that she and Spier “believe in God in the same way” (*Etty*, p. 327).

¹⁰ Elsewhere she equates feeling safe in God’s hands with feeling “no longer cut off quite so often from that deep undercurrent within me” and she adds that by not fantasising about something (a person, a day, a meal) in advance; not having fixed ideas about them, “I am becoming freer and freer, learning not to inhibit the growth of anything, be it a person, or a day, or a book or God [h]imself; or myself.” (p. 197 both quotes).

Etty never says anything like ‘God is beyond our ken’ or that ‘God is a transcendent mystery’¹¹. Rather, God is one of her many dialogue partners; one who is reached through prayer and an inner listening she calls (‘hin-eyn-horshen’) *hineinhorchen* (*Etty*, p. 319 e.g p. 90, 120, 125, 519 harkening) a listening facilitated by a kneeling posture close to Islamic prostration (*Etty*, p. 198) which she describes as “even more intimate than sex” (p. 148, also see p. 181, 320 and 547).

However, “the word ‘God’”, she notes, “is only a metaphor after all, an approach to our greatest and most continuous inner adventure” (*Etty*, p. 439). She immediately adds:

“[W]hen I sometimes have the inclination to speak to God ... it is ... as if I were addressing something in myself to plead with a part of myself.” (*Etty*, p. 440).

Her idea of God is something to which she must remain faithful; (pp. 461-2, 493-4) something she must help to save against the forces of bitterness and resentment that fuel the cycle of violence. For her, to defend God within is to defend a space in which silence can grow, with patience, into inner sources of creativity; it is to defend the value of life over death, peace over war, dignity over humiliation (*Etty*, p.466) meaning over despair and love over hatred. Defending these values is what it meant for her to show that God still lived even in these times.¹² Maintaining this faith in God took courage and inner strength that came with fervent prayer. She writes:

I am learning to control myself, even in those moments [of profound, exhausting creativity in which there are also “raging demons and self-destructive forces” present]. That is when I suddenly have an urge to kneel down in some quiet corner, to rein myself in and to make sure that my energies are not wildly dissipated” (*Etty*, p. 296)

When she shudders at parading German soldiers she again turns to prayer:

God do not let me dissipate my strength, not the least little bit of my strength on useless hatred against these soldiers (*Etty*, p. 329).

In prayer, Etty is in dialogue with the deepest and best part of herself, her deepest inner sources and her better moments (*Etty*, p. 210). Immediately after noting that moral certainties “spring from sources deep inside oneself” (*Etty*, p. 175) she prays:

Oh God, I thank [y]ou for having created me as I am. I thank [y]ou for the sense of fulfilment I sometimes have; that fulfilment is after all nothing but being filled with [y]ou. I promise [y]ou to

¹¹ Where she does talk about the incomprehensible it is in relation to human affairs for which she claims human beings always possess a faculty (*Etty*, p. 586). Or she is quoting Jung where it is the experience of a putatively ineffable rather than the ineffable itself that is real (*Etty*, p. 227 and p. 557). Or Rilke where words come from “deep within us, in the dark, in the ineffable, the unconscious, in what is beyond the grasp of reason” (*Etty*, p. 243). Indeed, she appears to see the ineffable as a challenge to develop her writing ability as a poet (*Etty*, pp. 172, 181, 341) to forge a new vocabulary (*Etty*, 378, 398, 510). She does speak of death as God’s “ultimate mystery” (*Etty*, p. 515).

¹² Her task, as she put it, was to “bear witness to the fact that God lived even in these times” (*Etty*, p. 506).

strive my whole life long for beauty and harmony and also humility and true love, whispers of which I hear inside me during my best moments.” (*Etty*, p. 175)

Her deliberate and unusual use of the Dutch lower case *je*, *jou*, or *jij* for the second person pronoun in her address to God rather than the more formal upper case *U* or *Gij* missed by the English translation¹³ and her unique definition of God, open **us** to a clear ambiguity concerning the identity of the ‘hidden source’ and dialogue partner of her prayers. She writes in the second diary book:

This afternoon I suddenly found myself kneeling on the brown coconut matting in the bathroom. ... Kneeling doesn’t really come easily to me, I feel a sort of embarrassment. Why? Probably because of the critical, rational, atheistic bit that is part of me as well. And yet every so often I have a great urge to kneel down with face in my **hands** and in this way to find some peace and to listen to that hidden source within me. (*Etty*, p. 103)¹⁴

On her definition, God can have no body, no hands, no feet and no eyes on Earth but ours.

In her final post card, Etty refers to ‘those writing to Amsterdam’; specifically those writing to Gabriel Metsustraat 61 in Amsterdam. This is where Etty had lived since 1937. The house, opposite the Rijksmuseum and close to the red-light district, was owned by an elderly widower, Han Wegerif with whom Etty had been in a sexual relationship since moving in: “living as man and wife” as Etty puts it (*Etty*, p. 350) “paying for my board and lodging by providing good cheer and companionship” (*Etty*, p. 23). Also living there was Hans, (p. 90) Han’s son, Kathe, Han’s German cook who Etty describes as her “second mother” (*Etty*, p. 19) and who was instrumental in the development of Etty’s refusal to hate Germans (*Etty*, pp. 18-21); Maria with whom she left her diaries in safe keeping to pass to one of Etty’s

¹³ In the first prayer she writes in the diary she follows Dutch convention and uses *U* (*Etty*, p. 154). This suggests that her more usual use of *je*, *jou*, or *jij* elsewhere in her address to God is intentional and that she saw something “too ponderous and emphatic” (*Etty*, p.161) in the conventional address to God. There is an earlier prayer in which *je* is used but this is closer to an exclamation ‘Oh God’ than to a serious prayer (*Etty*, p. 68). Etty uses the formal German ‘*Sie*’ when addressing Spier (e.g. “I must ask you (*Sie*) something” (*Etty*, p. 197) and is aware “I still use the formal *Sie*, perhaps to keep the right distance” (*Etty*, p. 188) even when speaking alone with Spier and about what Etty considers intimate matters: his gestures to women and prayer (*Etty*, p. 197). Earlier she had indicated an awareness of her use of the formal form of address in the conversations she has with her closest friends, “Silly isn’t it, that my nearest and dearest ... are men whom I address with the formal *U*” (*Etty*, p. 167) and yet in prayer she address God informally. Three days after her first serious prayer in which God is addressed as *je* she asks Spier, “What are you (*Sie*) thinking of right now”, and then adds in parenthesis “(Sometimes I still use the formal *Sie* in even the most intimate moments, isn’t that strange?)” (*Etty*, p. 227 also see p. 427). It is just as strange that she should use the informal lower case *jou*, *je* and *jij* when addressing God.

¹⁴ During the writing of this second and the next diary book Etty, at the suggestion of Spier, is reading Oskar Pfister’s *Psychoanalyse und Weltanschauung* (*Etty*, pp. 80, 147, 158, 701). Pfister (1873-1956) advocated the connections between religion and psychology and promoted a notion of Christian Eros – a desire, according to Jung, for interconnectivity and wholeness. It should be noted that Etty not only says, in the context of reading this work, that she is grateful to Spier for “the broadening of my horizons” and, thereby, stimulating her creative energy that fill her with a gratitude bordering on ecstasy such that “I am so full of life, and that I am able to grasp in my own way what is to come, make life worth the trouble again every time and from the very pillar of my life” (*Etty*, p. 147). It should also be noted that it is around this time she discovers she is pregnant. Two days after speaking of this gratitude she does so again (*Etty*, p. 150) but this time after recalling a wish she had had that her womb be removed but rejects this course of action out of the need “to accept yourself as you were created” (p. 150). What she refuses to allow for herself though is the status of motherhood. “I don’t want children ...” (*Etty*, p. 152). For Etty psychology is a “tool for getting closer to literature” (*Etty*, p. 153) and getting closer to herself and her creative sources (*Etty*, p. 126). And when she asks God for a sign it is as if she is addressing her blocked inner creativity. “Look God. I’ll do my best. I shall not withdraw from life. I shall stay down here and try to develop any talent I may have. I shall not be a saboteur. But give me a sign now and then and let some music flow from me, let what is within me be given expression, it longs so desperately for that” (*Etty*, p. 153)

former lover, Klass Smelik, for possible publication after the war and Bernard Meylink, a scientist, through whom Etty was introduced to the fifty-four-year-old Julius Spier on 3rd of February 1941 – a day Etty would label her second birthday (*Etty*, p. 246) to indicate the significant effect Spier had on her. Through the magnetism of his personality¹⁵ (*Etty*, pp. 109-110) and his psychological learning he had, she wrote following his death from cancer on the day he was called up to Westerbork, “dug up God in me and brought [h]im to life” (*Etty*, p. 567 also see pp. 516-7). Spier did this by helping her to unblock a path to her deeper self where, she claims, also resided her inner creative sources (*Etty*, pp. 353, 373, 535). She says he helped her to find “deep inner serenity for the sake of creation”¹⁶ (*Etty*, p. 318).

Always referred to simply as S. in the diary Spier was a student of Jung and conducted his therapy through chirolgy (palm reading) and other methods of bodily self-expression such as wrestling (*Etty*, p. 45 also pp. 12-13, 15, 157, 334) and diary writing.¹⁷ Etty writes in her first diary entry, “body and soul are one. That was no doubt why he began to test my physical strength in a sort of wrestling match” (*Etty*, p. 6).

Etty was at first his patient, then his friend¹⁸ (*Etty*, pp. 81, 133, 136, 150, 154, 176-177, 188, 196, 201, 294, 316), his secretary¹⁹ (*Etty*, pp. 147, 153, 155, 190, 231) and his student of both life (*Etty*, pp. 378, 553) and psychology (*Etty*, pp. 67, 97, 110, 128-9) a field of study she describes as the theory and the practice of working with people that “has somehow been written all over my **body**” (*Etty*, p. 110). She felt more deeply attached to the study of psychology than to law in the six years she studied it (*Etty*, p. 129) even though she proudly wore the legal title of Mr.

In Spier, Etty found her soul-mate (*Etty*, pp. 239-40) and, despite his claimed preference for chastity (*Etty*, p. 227) (driven by his wish to remain faithful to Hertha²⁰, his fiancée, 2 years Etty’s junior, waiting

¹⁵ “I believe in the importance of his work and of his person. I keep seeing the results all round me” (*Etty*, p. 109)

¹⁶ She adds, “Though whether I shall ever ‘create’ is something I can’t really tell. But I do believe that it is possible to create, even without ever writing a word or painting a picture by simply ‘moulding one’s inner life. And that too is a deed.” (*Etty*, p. 318)

¹⁷ It was at his suggestion that Etty began her diary.

¹⁸ She sees him as her “best friend” (*Etty*, pp. 123, 294). “I am off to see S [for five minutes]. He is my friend. He is my best friend. No doubt about it. I am about to warm myself with his radiance, and he is my friend. He is there, unreservedly. He is not in a prison or in distant parts. He is here, in Nicolaas Maesstraat [Max Geiger’s Restaurant (*Etty*, p. 721)], I am going straight to him, and then he will be there in the flesh, and I shall look at him and enjoy his lived in face. And best of all, he is my friend. (...) All at once I was experiencing the reality of our friendship to the full with gratitude, with gratitude that life was being suddenly renewed and regenerated” (*Etty*, p. 294). She had also written, “... probably the most essential aspect of a friendship: the reflecting of each other. And in the friendship with S. I have become aware of this for the first time” (*Etty*, p. 196). She then quotes Rilke, “I want always to mirror you full size” (*Etty*, p. 196).

¹⁹ Although writing in shorthand is far from the creative writing she would like to be doing (*Etty*, p. 190) she seems to have enjoyed being his secretary “I am sailing full speed ahead again” (*Etty*, p. 190) she writes after describing her secretarial activity including jokingly describing herself as “this branch of our office” taking shorthand notes (*Etty*, p. 190).

²⁰ Hertha Levi (1916-2014). Hertha existed for Etty in the letters which Spier allowed her to read sent to him by Hertha from London, (*Etty*, pp. 241, 255) as a smiling face in a photo on Spier’s chest-of-draws (*Etty*, pp. 425, 441), and as the source of resistance against a regular sexual relationship developing between herself and Spier – due to Spier’s desire to remain faithful to Hertha a faithfulness that was both continually breached by but never abandoned. According to Alexandra Nagel, in ‘Hertha Levi, The Invisible Figure in the Diaries of Etty Hillesum’ (April 2014 at https://www.academia.edu/9129719/Hertha_Grove_Levi_the_invisible_figure_in_the_diaries_of_Etty_Hillesum)

Hertha, a talented musician, escaped Nazi Germany for London with the help of her brother 3 months before the beginning of the war. She had met Spier in Berlin in 1937 when she was 21. According to the editors of Etty’s diary Hertha had been his student (*Etty*, p. 680) and was his secretary before becoming his fiancée. She was instrumental in getting Spier’s book, *The*

for him in London²¹ (*Etty*, pp. 24, 33, 34, 35, 55, 95, 170, 263-327, 368-373 May 23rd-24th 1942) and Etty's relationship with Han (*Etty*, p. 33) they, nevertheless, also became lovers. It is out of the dynamic of the relationship between Etty, Spier and the absent Hertha that Etty will write to Hertha in her diary "Through suffering I have learned that we must share our love with the whole of humanity. Only thus can we gain admittance to [a common bond]"²² (*Etty*, 442).

4. Introducing Etty on the Sexual Body

In the early diary entries Etty describes herself as 'accomplished in bed' and boasts of being 'among the better lovers' (*Etty*, p. 4). In the middle of the diary she proudly wears a dress she has made which she describes as "open on all sides to the sun, the wind, and his caresses" (*Etty*, p. 331)²³ and recounts her irresistibly seductive dancing (*Etty*, pp. 283-4, 285-7, 336 also p. 225)²⁴ which, she tells us, presents "a form of sensuality which springs from much deeper depths than from the **body** alone" (*Etty*, p. 283) and which was described by others as "beyond the bounds of decency" (*Etty*, p. 286). And, in her final diary entry, she says, with obvious allusions to divine offerings:

"I have broken my **body** like bread and shared it out among men [males]. And why not, they were hungry and had gone without for so long." (*Etty*, p. 549)

Hands of Children, published posthumously in 1944. Carl Jung later added an introduction to the 1955 edition. In 1950 Hertha married Spier's London publisher and in 1954 they emigrated to the United States. Nagel reports a brief correspondence between Hertha and Henny Tideman in the mid 1980's. By the time Nagel contacted Hertha herself in 2011 she was 94 and was able to recall less about Spier than Nagel already knew but she did say that she and Spier had been very close and that he was a genius but it seems that after her marriage she had pushed him out of her mind. For example, in an interview she gave for the Yad Vashem archive in 2001 she makes no reference to him and she refused to co-operate with the editors of the complete edition of Etty's writings. As a result Nagel had to rely on her correspondence with Tideman in the 1980's. From these letters it seems that Hertha had read the edited version of Etty's diary and had done so with emotional difficulty since it dragged up memories of the holocaust. She also found it emotional to discover from her reading of the edited diary that 'Hertha' had been the name on Spier's dying breathe. She was also unsettled to discover that there had been someone else in Spier's life. She was unhappy to learn that Spier had allowed Etty to read the letters she had sent to Spier and wondered if in fact this was true. She suggests that Spier initially used her as part of a game to rebuff Etty – but this, according to Tideman, did not accord with her own direct experience rather, Tideman suggests, it was less a matter of rebuffing but part of his general appeal to encourage his friends to be connected but not bound to him. Nagel notes that Spier had written to Hertha during the war saying that he was surrounded by a lot of love but she did not realise that this went as far as having an affair with Etty. However, Nagel also reports that in these correspondence of the mid 1980's Hertha reveals a surprising possible explanation for the affair. With Spier in the Netherlands and her still in Berlin she had gone to the Dutch embassy to sign marriage documents but refused at the last moment. She sent him a telegram calling off their engagement until after the impending war. We have no date for this but maybe she was already planning her escape to London. Throughout the diary Etty continually expresses and fights against her jealousy of Hertha; a jealousy that is, to a large degree, overcome in a mock letter she writes to Hertha in her diary (*Etty*, pp. 441-443 also see p. 117, 357).

²¹ The complexity of the dynamic between Etty, Spier and Hertha is articulated by Etty in what she calls an "algebraic formula...roughly like this : if I enter into a full relationship with him, the damage and the conflicts resulting from that in his relationship with Hertha would be greater than the enrichment our relationship might gain. And the conflicts in his relationship for Hertha might have a devastating effect on our relationship." (*Etty*, p. 373) She makes it clear to S. that she does not agree with where he draws the line between faithfulness to Hertha and his relationship with her. He was, she says, "burying his head in the sand" about his idea of faithfulness when he has just had sex with her (*Etty*, p. 355-361). Etty, reflects on their relationship in too long entries over the weekend of 24th and 25th of May (*Etty*, pp. 367-376) which ends once again with a comment that links by contrast the sexual and the praying body. In response to her question on the subject Spier replies "I never masturbate after praying" (*Etty*, p. 367). Her 'formula', it should be noted, is very close to what she wrote in her diary 14 months earlier back in March 1941. There she had written, "he is infinitely dear to me and I would not want to spoil the fine, warm feelings I have for him with the complication of a sexual relationship; no good can come of it, with his future wife in London. I want a man for life, I feel that is what I want; but the struggle will be hard and not just with S." (*Etty*, p. 34).

²² Initially Spier is the object of this shared love but the logic of the statement; its expansion to include all of humanity, as Spier had always taught, is manifest in her voluntary move to Westerbork and confirmed after his death.

²³ She admits to deliberately dressing seductively in the hope that Spier will hold her tightly in his arms (*Etty*, p. 49)

²⁴ "I also believe," she writes, "at a point, that dancing can make way for pure bacchanalian intoxication in me" (*Etty*, p. 286).

Yet, she also notes in the first diary entry that erotic love “remains a mere trifle set apart from what is truly essential and deep inside me...” (*Etty*, p. 4).²⁵ However, she thinks her unconventional and adventures²⁶ sex-life is neither “sordid” nor “decadent”. “To me”, she writes, “it feels perfectly all right” (*Etty*, p. 168 each quote) and this directly before she recounts the self-induced termination of her pregnancy.²⁷ Or, as Etty describes it, “A night of love snuffed out with quinine pills and ... hot brandy.” (*Etty*, p. 165).

Former sexual partners appear throughout the diary (*Etty*, pp. 145, 279, 283-4, 295) and there are others hinted at who don't (*Etty*, pp. 47, 300, 317 (Adpana) pp. 4, 36, (Abrasha)). During its writing Etty is in a sexual relationship with both Han and Spier and although not without occasional elements of stress (*Etty*, pp. 135, 150, 257, 283, 293, 297, 327, 339, 345, 349,) she displays genuine affection toward both men (*Etty*, pp. 35,121, 144, 180, 182, **256**, 293, **332-3**, 361, 372, 433) and is content with this two lover arrangement (*Etty*, p. 224) even though she recognises that her age difference “precludes any common future”²⁸ (*Etty*, pp. 123, 150, 155, 196, 293, 360, 445, 449, 511) with either. “Both men”, she writes, “are more than half a century old. It's a mad life” (*Etty*, p. 445) Nevertheless, she felt she had enough love for both (*Etty*, pp. 224-5, 229-230) and could be faithful to both men (*Etty*, pp. 168, 123, **206**, 256, 332 **364** although see pp. 135, 339, 356) even though she sometimes felt that she may be working out her longing for Spier on Han (*Etty*, pp. 256-7, 292-3) “I really am trying not to do that” (*Etty*, p. 257), she writes, but admits on one occasion to “weeping quietly into [Han's] armpit with desire for the other man” (*Etty*, p. 257). This is a tension she will later attempt to resolve (*Etty*, 292-3) but not entirely eradicate

²⁵ Later she says, “Sex. for me, is not all that important, although I give the impression that it is” (*Etty*, p.123). Then she ponders, “Isn't it cheating to allow men to be taken in by that impression and then be unable to give them what they want” (*Etty*, p. 123). She is willing to turn down the offer of sex when she wants to (*Etty*, pp. 135 (Han) 283-4 (Klaas)) exclaiming “Oh, men, men! With your petty possessive instincts” (*Etty*, p. 284) but admits, “I used to toy with men in the past” (*Etty*, p. 283) but now, she says, “I have had my fill of loving and being loved by men” (*Etty*, p. 123) but later this: “I hid my head between his knees and later I pulled him down onto the floor right on top of me – really tasteless. Passion to order” (*Etty*, p. 267)

²⁶ Etty writes, “What sticks in my mind most, in fact? It's little Dicky, who hearing something rustle in the dark when I took off my dress, said very pertly, “Oh, well, I'll take mine off as well. That was so natural and so refreshing. And there went the dress, and there we were lying with our bare arms and shoulders pressed against him. ... And his hands on her breast, a my mouth on his and my arms around him reached towards Dicky. It was so wonderful, and not in the least perverse, and yet so full of physical enjoyment. The three of us just lay there enjoying one another, and it felt so good because the human element was predominant. And when he slipped into the other room, Dicky and I suddenly fell into each other's arms, and seeing us lie there he said almost ecstatically, ‘My darling girls, oh what darling girls you are,’ and he flung himself on top of the two of us. And at one point he was kissing whatever he could reach. Dicky and me in turn, as the mood took him. And I wasn't jealous, there was something so right about it all ...” (*Etty*, p. 104). The next evening she continued her reflection describing this *ménage à trois* as “the icing on the cake” and “that sweet bacchanal” (*Etty*, p. 108 both quotes). Feeling confident and secure in herself she concludes this entry “life is worth living. God, [y]ou are with me after all, if only a little bit.” (*Etty*, p. 108). Etty had earlier also described this incident as “so beautiful” (*Etty*, p. 104) and a “sudden act of indulgence [uitspatting]” (*Etty*, p. 104) a word, that can also mean ‘excess’, which she also uses to describe sex with Han (*Etty*, p. 214)). Just a week earlier (*Etty*, p. 93) she had sought simplicity rather than what she called her excessive “bacchanalia of the spirit” (*Etty*, p. 93) a “cosmic bacchanalia” (*Etty*, 371) of mental over-activity of fantasies or over-thinking things (a “mental masturbation” as she had earlier called it (*Etty*, p. 24)). Now the “sweet bacchanal” (*Etty*, p. 108) had turned physical with S and Dicky as well as with Han. Later, she would castigate herself for feeling jealous of Dicky who rented a room in the same building as S. (*Etty*, pp. 176-7, 179)

²⁷ At a point close to when she realises she is pregnant on 25th November 1941 she writes, “There are moments when I think my life has gone utterly astray, that there's something wrong with it – but that is only because, compared with my fixed idea of what life should be like, the life I actually lead sometimes seems wrong.” (*Etty*, p. 154). It is the fixed ideas that are wrong, she will say on a number of occasions (*Etty*, pp. 180, 197).

²⁸ At one stage she notes that she is 28 and their combined age 123 (*Etty*, p. 449)

(*Etty*, p. 445). For his part, S. expresses no jealousy because, as he claims, he would not want her to “give-up” Han out of a misplaced sympathy for his own feelings (*Etty*, p. 450). Han, meanwhile, seems happy to be left in the dark with only an inkling of her other relationship (*Etty*, pp. 339).

She begins one entry on 2nd January 1942 like this:

The flesh, and only the flesh, had a sudden desire for every last lust to be summoned up from its deepest depths. That doesn't happen to me all that often. But when it does, it doesn't matter who the man is (*Etty*, pp. 213-214).

It just happened to be Han. She then proceeds to describe Han as “nothing more than an instrument” conducting “the call of [her] flesh for a little release” which she terms a “sudden little indulgence” (*Etty*, p. 214).

Paradoxically, the only one to get some satisfaction was the man taken in surprise ... when he suddenly discovered a naked woman at his **feet** (*Etty*, p. 214).

At one stage she admits that, having kissed S with “demonic” intensity her kisses with Han felt Platonic in comparison (*Etty*, p. 333 see also pp. 72, 78, and 436) and reflecting on why she continues to have sex with Han there are, she says, “noble” reasons such as: ‘for his sake,’ but also, she writes, because, “**Bodies** that have known each other for so long suddenly begin to move with their own laws and rhythms” (*Etty*, p. 333). Having Han in her life has given her greater patience, “has”, she says, “helped to assuage my appetite,” (*Etty*, p. 332) and restrained her desire for S (*Etty*, p. 332). She writes:

I am lying in bed beside Han, my bare legs between his thighs, looking at his profile and his closed **eyes**. There is an expectant expression on his face. ... I now have the patients to wait for that loving caress from S. that has become so essential to me, and that patience I owe to Han. Life with him over the years has helped to assuage my appetite, life with him and his caressing **hands**, which were always round me. ... I ... appreciate the important role he has played. I love him very much, differently. ... There are no fresh possibilities. Yet here I am lying by his side stretched beside him in real affection, and watching his expectant profile to see whether he wants me again tonight, and I am ready for that as well – not for me, but for him. Out of a sense that he has a right to, but also out of genuine friendship (*Etty*, p. 332).

The next morning she corrects herself. She had not written “the whole truth.” ‘Genuine friendship’ and ‘for his sake’ were only part of the truth. She writes:

[I]t isn't just giving on my part, it also becomes an act of ‘taking’ and of ‘pleasure’” (*Etty*, p. 333).

It should not be forgotten that Nazi law forbade sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews so Etty's relationship with Han whatever else it may have been was an act of resistance: the resistance of life and love over Nazi death and hatred; of civil society over Nazi law. A similar resistance is detectable when,

in the context of speaking of concentrations camps, Etty describes the luxury of being able to wash her body with scented lilac soap²⁹ (*Etty*, p. 356). She writes:

In a labour camp I should die within three days. I should lie down and die and still not find life unfair. ... Every pretty blouse I put on is a kind of celebration. And so is every occasion I have to wash with scented soap in a bathroom all to myself for half an hour. It's as if I were revelling in these civilized luxuries for the last time. But even if I have to forgo them one day, I shall always know that they exist and that they can make life pleasant, and I shall think of them as a great boon even if I can't share in them any longer (*Etty*, p. 464).

She immediately recalls how the yellow star singled her out for attention by a bully of whom she writes:

He probably thinks he's a great idealist; no doubt he'll do his bit one day to clear society of all 'Jewish elements' (*Etty*, p. 468).

And then she adds:

But I am not the slightest bit concerned about cutting a fine figure in the **eyes** of this persecutor or that. Let them see my sadness and my utter defencelessness too. There is no need to put on a show. I have my inner strength and that is enough, the rest doesn't matter (*Etty*, p. 468).

This inner strength which she says is "coursing through my **body**" (*Etty*, p. 366) is something Etty developed as a result of both her relationship with Spier (*Etty*, p. 327)³⁰ (Part 1b) and her discovery of prayer (Part 2). These are the bricks and mortar out of which she builds her life's strong inner centre (*Etty*, pp. 124, 353, 364, 371) and into which she can continually dive in-order to re-new herself and regain contact with her creative sources: a contact that allowed life to flow through her, she says like "a great, rich, mighty river fed by an infinite number of small tributaries" (*Etty*, p. 301).

Among other things Etty comes to understand from Spier that the source of her inner strength is the divine³¹ (*Etty*, p. 14, 30, 32 181, 222-3, 535) and that "love of mankind is greater than love of one man"³²

²⁹ In this light of resistance we might also understand her delight in eating. For example, eating preserved strawberries with mock cream. She writes, "... from sheer poverty, we ate strawberries with cream during the second year of the war in February 1942" (*Etty*, p. 244).

³⁰ She records that her personality gets ever stronger through her interaction with Spier and through her committing to the pages of her diary her reflections on him (*Etty*, p. 171). She writes in May 1942, "But last night, bicycling over to see him [Spier], I suddenly felt fresh strength coursing through my **body**. I was able to understand him and the whole world, and suddenly I felt so grateful again for having been made in such a way that I can absorb and bear and cope with everything life sends me. I flexed my biceps – it is funny how the **body** can parallel your mood" (*Etty*, p. 366). And later, "I have drawn nothing but life and strength from it all, from my ever stronger feelings for him" (*Etty*, p. 373).

³¹ According to Spier, "Whoever helps himself, trusts himself and his inner being, also trusts God" (*Etty*, p. 32). But this is also something she learns from reading Jung (*Etty*, p. 213)

³² She recalls Spier as telling her that, "When love for all mankind is not involved in some way or other, we eventually become impoverished and limited" (*Etty*, p. 302). This wider love of mankind is also something Etty also learns from her other great teacher (*Etty*, p. 447), the poet, Rainer Maria Rilke (*Etty*, pp. 303-4)

(*Etty*, p. 69). However, Spier seems to have been as much a granite-like blockage³³ to this universal love as its inspiration.³⁴

5. Body and Soul: The Influence of Spier

From early on in their relationship *Etty* recognises “conflicting feelings” (*Etty*, p. 46) toward Spier. To begin with she was surprised by the way he conducted himself during sessions of therapy which made her feel “a bit uncomfortable” (*Etty*, p. 45). *Etty* is both appalled and intrigued by Spier’s physical gestures toward her (*Etty*, p. 45) but these also, she admits piqued what she called her “erotic curiosity” (*Etty*, p. 33). She thought “it exceedingly mean of him,” she wrote, “to abuse his position” convulsing on top of her, “putting his **hands** out and touching my breasts, then my arms and shoulders (...). A funny way of treating patients” she notes (*Etty*, p. 45). She exclaims:

Who told you that you could do this to me, who gave you the right to touch my **body**? (*Etty*, p. 45).

But then she surmises, “it was all part of the treatment”³⁵ and continues:

And that’s indeed what it was, for when it was all over he stated very matter-of-factly, ‘**Body** and soul are one’ decent of you to discuss it so openly (*Etty*, p. 45).

She replied in a sarcastic voice.

Despite what we might rightly understand today as patient abuse³⁶, *Etty* feels that something special radiates from Spier’s words and gestures toward her – an experience shared by some of his other patients.³⁷ She was impressed by his “human kindness and warmth” (*Etty*, p. 46) in which, she says, she “can bask without reservation” (*Etty*, p. 70). But she also envied his sexual restraint³⁸ (*Etty*, p. 70) which

³³ *Etty* compares S. to granite on a number of occasions (*Etty*, pp. 120, 167 170) of being inwardly crushed by his weight (*Etty*, pp. 4, 7). She also speaks of a granite-like blockage to her inner creativity (*Etty*, pp. 12, 42, 102, 120-121, 231, 340, 402). A sense of a spiritual blockage (*Etty*, p. 22, 98) gives her the feeling that God is buried within her under stones and grit (*Etty*, p. 91).

³⁴ Between September 1941 and December 1942 (*Etty*, pp. 96-168) *Etty* finds a number of ways to express both her extreme fondness of S. and an enormous antipathy toward him (*Etty*, p. 148).

³⁵ A treatment in which “He talked and I listened ... and now an then he put his hands very tenderly on my face” (*Etty*, p. 46)

³⁶ On one occasion he admits to doing no psychological work on *Etty* only engaging in gossip and she replies that in an evening of physical passion between the both of them and Dicky de Jonge (*Etty*, pp. 104-6, 108) he “did more psychological work on me than the whole previous month put together” (*Etty*, p. 107). He responds, “Is that rrrright? All I remember is that we made love, nothing else” (*Etty*, pp. 107-8).

³⁷ However, some of his patients did not appreciate his ‘hands on’ approach. As Spier’s secretary *Etty* discovers a letter from a nurse sent to him after beginning therapy with him. The nurse writes, “I’d rather not come any more. There are no disagreeable (*naars*) after effects. It’s just a pity it fell short of my expectations” (*Etty*, p. 185). *Etty* reads from the letter, “A storm of honest indignation. Not jealousy.” She comments, “It is his duty to keep himself under control as far as his patients are concerned. I really must have a talk with him about it, it bothers me, not on my account but for the sake of his work” (*Etty*, p. 185). Recalling her own early encounter with Spier’s therapy again she adds this:

It ‘fell short of my expectations’ too at the time, but surely he doesn’t have the time to embark upon such friendships with all the patients he lays **hands** on, if only to make them realise how unimportant the sensual factor really is. After all, a man of fifty-five who says ‘vanity of vanities, all is vanity but one must have experienced it first’, can’t expect young women who are brimming over with problems and who confide their souls, their dreams and everything else to him to have reached his stage of development or even to understand him.

Etty is suggesting here in her defence of Spier’s methods that one has first to have ‘sensual’ (*zinnelijke*) contact in order to understand its secondary importance to deeper, more important, forms of contact.

³⁸ An analysis of a Rorschach test, she reveals had shown “his sexual problem had been completely resolved, that it had been ‘subordinated’ to his overall personality and that it now played a secondary role in his life” (*Etty*, p. 70). Whether this is or not

she wanted to learn to emulate. His “large sensitive **hands**”, she writes, “that reach out for you now and then” and his caressing eyes, she complains, are “impersonal ... He caresses the human being, not the woman,” and adds, “... the woman wants to be caressed as a woman, not a human being. At least that’s how I feel at times” (*Etty*, p.70).

On a number of occasions Etty says that “his ... **hands** (“his much-loved bear’s-paw” (*Etty*, p. 231), as she described them at one point) conduct a tenderness that flows straight from his soul”³⁹ (*Etty*, pp. 442, 46, 366). There was “nothing offensive about it” (*Etty*, p. 366) she notes later, and she admits to her need for physical caressing – of which, she says, “I have never had to go short” (*Etty*, p. 123, 427). He was, she says later, “kneading” (*Etty*, p. 162) her into shape. Later she writes:

... his caressing **hands** are part and parcel of our everyday dialogue even when he is dictating a businesslike letter, his **hands**, those constant conductors of warmth and tenderness, are caressing my thighs or my breasts or my hair or my eyelashes. It’s our everyday dialogue and I should be dishonest, [she adds, in her understated dry wit], were I to claim that it puts me into a state of constant excitement (*Etty*, p. 428).⁴⁰

However this was not a one way affair. She writes:

My **hand** squeezed its way past all sorts of little buttons on his shirt and came to rest on his hairy chest (*Etty*, p. 449).⁴¹

Etty conveys the importance of their relationship in a letter to him, “if I ever attain a perfectly clear relationship with you,” she writes, “then much will be clarified in my relationship with all men and all humanity” (*Etty*, p. 553)⁴². He was, she writes in September 1941, “an idiot of a fellow who dabbles in people’s **hands** and who has since become the most important man ever to enter my life.” (*Etty*, p. 110).

Like Spier, Etty countenanced no dualism between body and soul. “**Body** and soul”, she writes, “are very much one in my case” (*Etty* p. 121 also pp. 56, 66-7, 149-50, 433, 471)⁴³. The soul, she implies, belongs to the realm of poetics (*Etty* p. 24) – what we might, today, call theopoetics – the combination of mind and spirit; anything else, she suggests, would risk discrediting the word⁴⁴ (*Etty*, p. 28). Both body and soul must endure the burden of sorrow and suffering together, she states, and still be able to say that

the cases, Etty adds, “I think I became thoroughly envious then, and thought to myself something like, well, easy enough for you” (*Etty*, p. 70).

³⁹ She writes in May 1942, “Later that evening he said, ‘You look so well again’, and with that natural and direct gesture of his, which has nothing offensive about it, he reached for my breasts – And yet it is nothing but spiritual forces.” (*Etty*, p. 366)

⁴⁰ For further comment on eyelash stroking see pp. 45, 207, 549.

⁴¹ She immediately adds that he tells her Henny Tideman does that to him too but Etty reports no jealousy “that Tideman takes this liberty with his **body**” (*Etty*, p. 449) only the feeling that this made it so much the better. Also see pp. 267 and p. 288.

⁴² Etty says something similar in the diary as well (*Etty*, p. 69-70). Although it is mistranslated in the English edition of the diary to so that it incorrectly suggests that once Etty comes to understand her relationship with humanity she will understand her relationship with Spier. See, Ria van den Brandt, *Etty Hillesum: An Introduction to Her Thought* (ET Harry Monkel Berlin LIT 2014) p. 120.

⁴³ The manifold experiences of her life: her “faith in God and a spirit of sacrifice and love of mankind” are intensely felt by both her body and her soul. (*Etty*, p. 433).

⁴⁴ Later she will describe her own metaphor of “travelling through my own soul” as “nauseating” (*Etty*, p. 209)

life is beautiful⁴⁵ (*Etty*, p. 308). But living these words will requires an enormous amount of what Etty calls ‘hygiene’ (physical, spiritual and mental – see *Etty*, pp. 8, 58 (Jung), 104, 110, 121, 166, 239, 249).

The elements of the soul: mind and spirit; head and heart⁴⁶ (*Etty* p. 126 also 13, 104) must, she notes, develop **hand-in-hand** (*Etty*, pp. 118, 139) and with the body. She recognises that her mental mood is connected to both her body’s menstrual cycle⁴⁷ (*Etty* pp. **149-50**, 210, 214, 340, 374, 427-31) and to bodily ailments (*Etty* pp. 91, 103, 121, 125, 364, 366, **465**, 539). In relation to the former, which she calls her “senseless monthly performance” (*Etty* p. 150) because she doesn’t want children,⁴⁸ she comments:

The interaction of body and soul is a most mysterious thing. The remarkable, dreamy and yet illuminating mood I was in last night and this morning was due to this very change in my **body** (*Etty* p. 150).

Menstruation also creates in her, she says, a **body** bursting with restless desire for physical contact which lacks any substance but which, at ‘unguarded moments’ – and she writes this after one such moment – “leads you up the garden path” (*Etty*, p. 427).

In relation to bodily ailments she speaks of having a “psychological stomach ache” (*Etty*, p. 103) and notes:

I used to think that headaches, stomach aches, rheumatism and similar disagreeable conditions were nothing but physical, but now I see in myself that their main causes are psychological (*Etty*, p. 121).

She compares body and soul to Karl Marx’s distinction between economic substructure and cultural superstructure (*Etty*, p. 91). Without a rightly functioning body there is no rightly functioning soul. But later, after much spiritual hygiene, she allows that while the body may, through suffering (*Etty*, pp. 494, 499, 567), call a halt “the spirit can continue to do its work” (*Etty*, p. 519 also see p. 465). On July 3rd

⁴⁵ The soul can bear what, in the body, would be scars. The soul can be scared by words not said that needed to be said, by uncertainty, by cowardice, greed and indolence. Such scaring is an injustice against the mission of helping others (*Etty*, p. 216). At this point she again quotes St Francis of Assisi ‘Lord don’t make me so eager to be understood’ (*Etty*, p. 216 also pp. 94, 102). We should not make others suffer or burden others with our own sorrows (*Etty*, pp. 261-262) or complaints (*Etty*, p. 367).

⁴⁶ Although she also seems to refer to mind (meaning head) and soul (meaning heart) but both must develop together hand-in-hand (*Etty*, p. 139). Together, both head and heart create one’s mood which finds parallel in one’s body; for example, flexing one’s biceps in good mood (*Etty*, p. 366).

⁴⁷ “Menstruation,” she writes, “does have a drastic effect on the psyche, at least in my case” (*Etty*, p. 210). The onset of menstruation (*Etty* pp. 78, 128, [149-150, 151, 164 may refer to bleeding related to early pregnancy], 210, 214, 225, 277, 340, 426-7, 430, 453) and what calls ‘spring fever’ (her euphemism for sexual desire *Etty* pp. 260, 261-263, 265, 295) lead her into actions that take control of her will. Just before menstruating she feels only half responsible for her actions, agitation, disruption and recklessness abound (p. 427) and she is restless, full of fatigue and instability (*Etty*, p. 427). She writes:

It is on just such days that I sometimes feel a desperate need for physical contact, but I am beginning to realise that it is on just such days, too, that I must not give in to that, because the desire for contact is born solely out of physical need, and for a woman that is not enough, truly not. Added to which at such times the **body** probably makes demands but if these demands are unexpectedly met then it does appear that they had no real basis. Beyond the wishes and desires that burst from that **restless body** at unguarded moments, there seems to lie no real vitality, no real surrender. And that horrible restlessness leads you up the garden path and will continue to do so until sooner or later, you grow wise to it.” (*Etty*, p. 427)

⁴⁸ Partly because she values her freedom too much to desire motherhood, partly because she fears passing on to any offspring the mental disorders shared by both her brothers and partly because of the situation of Jews.

1942 she accepts the impending destruction of her body⁴⁹ (*Etty*, pp. 461-465) without any sense of bitterness or hatred (*Etty*, p. 466) as a new breakthrough moment and a new insight “at least” she writes, “if one can call something like that insight” (*Etty*, p. 465). Accepting the likelihood of the destruction of her body fills her with a great peace. She continues:

And all this because of one little blister on my left **foot**. My **body** is a home for many pains; they lie hidden in every corner, with first this one making itself felt and then the next. I have become reconciled to that too (*Etty*, p. 465).

On that July day she had walked for miles hand-in-hand with Spier (*Etty*, p. 465) exhausted through the streets of Amsterdam unable to take a tram or sit at the pavement cafes the yellow star marking them out as ‘walkers only’ but she is exhilarated too; not by a thought, she says, but a feeling that welled up in her; she explains:

[T]hroughout the ages people have been tired and have worn their **feet** out on God’s earth, in the cold and the heat, and that too, is part of life. This sort of feeling has been growing much stronger in me: a hint of eternity steals through my smallest daily activities and perceptions. I am not alone in my tiredness or sickness or fears, but at one with millions of others from many centuries and it is all part of life; and yet life is beautiful and meaningful too. It is meaningful even in its meaninglessness, provided one makes room in one’s life for everything and accept life as one indivisible whole, for then one becomes whole in oneself (*Etty*, 466).

After this walk, undertaken so as to accompany Spier to the tax office, she writes, “You’re in a poor state, *Etty*. Your **body** is completely unfit (*Etty*, p. 467). She then adds, “I praise life and God” (*Etty*, p. 467).

This walk makes her realise that no matter how alert her mind, if her body is unfit for the task it will be no good. However, she tells herself, she must not pretend to be fitter than she is merely to impress others⁵⁰ (by which she means Spier and Tide who have no trouble walking such distances). Nor must she complain about her unfit state so as to be a burden to others. Admitting to one’s own weakness is not the same as complaining about them, she notes (*Etty*, p. 467). One should never fear losing another’s love, she adds, out of failing to meet their expectations. In the past she writes, “I would have ruined my **feet** rather than give him the slightest cause to think I might spoil his walk” (*Etty*, p. 467). Nor should she deny, “that one may not always be for another just what one would like to be” (*Etty*, p. 467).

The next time she will take her bicycle. However, even that luxury will soon be denied her by Nazi law. Repeating her father’s joke, she writes:

⁴⁹ Death is no longer an enemy but an essential part of life taken as a whole (*Etty*, p. 464) “I know now that life and death make a meaningful whole. Death is a gentle slipping away even when gloom and abominations are its trappings.” (*Etty*, p. 476).

⁵⁰ “In the past,” she writes, “I never let on that I had overdone things: I kept on walking, kept on playing, went to bed very late, joined in everything. But wasn’t it all just showing off? Being afraid that others wouldn’t find me much fun and that they might drop me if they had to bear the weight of my tired **body** as well as their own? Just part of my inferiority complex” (*Etty*, p. 467).

At least we need fear no longer that our bicycles will be stolen ... in the wilderness we had to do without bicycles, for forty long years” (*Etty*, p. 445).

Etty finds release from her bodily pains in prayer (*Etty*, p. 364) even if her kneeling body itself becomes, what she calls, prayer’s “protective walls”, (p. 364) “as if, she writes, “my **body** had been meant and made for the act of kneeling” (*Etty*, p. 320).

Body and soul, she suggests in her penultimate diary entry, may run on different time scales⁵¹ but they are both part of a time-bound whole (*Etty*, p. 548). In the context of her refusal of suicide she quotes Ecclesiastes 9. 10 “Do whatever your hand finds to do” (*Etty*, p. 131) ‘do with your might’, this verse continues, ‘for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in *Sheol* to which you are going’. She can live in Spier’s spirit after his death (*Etty*, p. 471) and he, alongside others, can live on internalised in her (*Etty*, p. 518) but body and soul are ultimately both *Sheol*-bound. “The soul,” she says, is “hard” in the sense of Jewish Scripture “forged out of fire and rock crystal” (*Etty*, p. 549) but it is also, she says, returning to sexual imagery, as soft as Spier’s tender strokes of her eyelashes. But the body, on the other hand, continuing the sexual imagery is, as after “creative moments”, liable to, “utter exhaustion, as after ejaculation” (*Etty*, p. 549).

She was well aware that even the most profound spiritual experiences of inner peace and eternal harmony had material and sexual causes (*Etty*, p. 175) such as:

Hans’s warm **body** last night, in which I almost completely buried myself (*Etty*, 175)

But the material cause, while necessary, is secondary, what counts, she argues, echoing William James, is that profound inner experiences happen, and, however transient they may be, new strength can be drawn from them (*Etty*, p. 175). She says something similar about sexual union as happening “beyond the **body** – if necessarily through the **body**” what matters, she adds, being “the rich wider realms of communion ... [that] leaves the other his freedom” (*Etty*, p. 281 both quotes). These remarks come in a profound reflection on human love in an entry made on March 13th 1942 in which her internalisation of her love for Spier can be read as a model for her later articulation of her internalised God. (p. 281). She writes:

... we talked about why one has to suffer when one loves. But that is the wrong sort of love, self-centred love possessive love. I looked at him meanwhile and thought, almost aghast with every gesture, with every breath, the one we want to possess fights shy of that possession. It can’t be achieved through the **body** either – there are, of course, those blessed moments when **body** and soul are fused into one great whole, but one certainly has to be very mature for that to happen. We know that beyond the **body** – if necessarily through the **body** – there lie rich and wider realms of communion, but one has to be able to take the right inner steps and leave the other his freedom. Time and again I end with you, Rainer Maria [Rilke] ... Fritz Klart starts out by saying: “He [Rilke]

⁵¹ It is possible to spot a 1000 year old soul in a 12 year-old she says. It is not a matter of just having a good heart for wisdom is involved too (*Etty*, p. 548).

acknowledges the ever tragic theme of love in new words: ‘Never being at one with the beloved.’ That is why, for him, the higher love we still have to learn is this: to release the beloved (*Etty*, p. 281).

She then quotes Rilke:

For that is guilt, if guilt there ever was: not to increase the beloved’s freedom with all the freedom one can muster in oneself. When we love, we have only this: to let go of each other: for holding on comes easy to us and does not have to be learned (*Etty*, p. 281).

And then adds her interpretation of this:

To carry the other within one, always and everywhere, privately within oneself, and to live with him there. And not just with one, but with many. To draw the other into one’s inner space and to let him go on flourishing there, to assign him a place where he can grow and unfold. To live genuinely with another, to live with him even if you should not see him for years and allow him to go on living within you – that is the fundamental thing. And that way you can be with someone sheltered from the external vicissitudes of life. It makes for great responsibility – (p. 281 also see pp. 286-7).

The more Etty practiced this non-possessive love for Spier the greater the mutual attraction grew between them.

For Etty, body and soul: one’s outer and inner life, are sides of the same coin (*Etty*, pp. 71, **94**, 173, 209).

Back in January she writes:

“My **body** still has its own way much of the time, is not yet at peace with my soul. Yet I firmly believe in their oneness. And I believe less and less that one man is enough to satisfy my **body** and my soul.” (*Etty*, p. 225)

Influenced, as she was, by the psychological theories of Carl Jung, she felt the need to harmonise the life of the spirit with the sometimes wayward demands of the body⁵² liable as it is, she says, to follow its own material and sexual laws (*Etty*, pp. 333, 418, 429) so she recognises, in her words:

It is difficult to be on equally good terms with God and your **body** (*Etty*, p. 70).

But Etty wanted to be on good terms with both but recognised such harmony did not exist of itself (*Etty*, pp. 116, 125, 145) but must be worked for with discipline (*Etty*, pp. 111, 130, 131 163, **179**, 253 286, 316, 318) not necessarily by doing more, she discovers in the course of the diary, but through patience and learning how to accept; to accept the multiplicity of life as one great whole (*Etty*, p. 145 and pp. **136**, 22, 26, 87, 281, 461, 466, 527, 530) aiming to be simple (*Etty*, pp. 204, 53. 315, 374) and simply *be* (*Etty*, 94, 343, 365, 483, 628).

⁵² In Jungian style she writes, “the only true unity is that which embraces all the opposites and irrational elements, or else it is just another form of frenzy, of being tied down, and that violates life” (*Etty*, p. 199). She also finds support in this view from Rilke, “Who all the contradictions of his life/placates, and gratefully in a symbol frames” (*Etty*, p. 199).

Like the grace of creativity this simplicity has to be worked for by inner preparation (*Etty*, pp. 253, 281, 378-9) “we shape our fate from within” she writes, or at least our response to it (*Etty*, pp. 254, 258, 318). The process of her inner preparation will lead Etty to discover a body posture “more intimate,” she writes, “even than being with a man” (*Etty*, p. 547): the posture of prayer. **To understand Etty Hillesum is to understand the free erotic self-to-other-centred impulses that underlay her sexual body and the holistic, purely other-centred impulses that underlay her praying body: the safe walls of her prayer cell** (*Etty*, pp. 469 and 169). These two bodies are discussed in Parts 1b and 2.

Two weeks before she volunteers to serve at Westerbork, Spier is confined to his room by curfew and his cancer. The ‘Spier Club’ keep him fed. Etty communicates with him by letter, “My ear feels bereft and empty,” she writes, “without your vibrant, loving voice in the morning” (*Etty*, p. 490). Breaking the curfew on foot, because Jews are now no longer allowed to ride bikes, she runs to visit him as if she hadn’t seen him in ten years. On arriving, she notes, they leap “around each other like two puppies gone mad” (*Etty*, p. 490). She wishes she could stay with him but then writes “one must have no more wishes” (*Etty*, p. 490, cf p. 376). A few days later over Sunday night she will sleep in his arms and then, the following day, sits in the corner of his room darning his socks contemplating the ocean of life (*Etty*, pp. 92, 120, 130, 490-1, 512-3, 567) that lay ahead of her (*Etty*, pp. 512-513) feeling she is living a “serious yet cheerful life” (510).

Her relationship with Spier taught her that suffering, both emotional and physical, must find its outlet in universal love. Volunteering for service at Westerbork allows her to break free (*Etty*, p. 327) from both Han and Spier and fulfil her mission (*Etty*, p. 122) of universal love.

Conclusion

Later, in the concentration camp, she will write:

It is the only way one can live nowadays with unreserved love for all one’s tortured fellow creatures, no matter what nation, race or creed.” (*Etty*, p. 629)

And again,:

[Even if people] “don’t give you much occasion to love them ... I keep discovering that there is no causal connection between people’s behaviour and the love you feel for them. Love for one’s fellow man is like an elemental glow that sustains you.” (*Etty*, p 635)

A significant bodily gesture that allows Etty to translate her erotic feelings into universal love was the posture of prayer. On Good Friday 1942 she writes:

Sometimes, in moments of deep gratitude, kneeling down becomes an overwhelming urge, head deeply buried, **hands** before my face. It has become a gesture embedded in my **body**, needing to be expressed from time to time. And I remember ‘The girl who could not kneel,’ and the rough cocnut matting in the bathroom. When I write these things down, I still feel a little ashamed, as if I were

writing about the most intimate of intimate matters. Much more bashful than if I had to write about my love life. But is there indeed anything as intimate as man's relationship to God? (*Etty*, p. 320 also pp. 148, p. 181, and 547)

Etty had discovered in the posture of kneeling in prayer that it was possible to be on equally good terms with both God and her body.

There is much more to Etty's account of the body but that will come in Part 1b. I would like to close here by sharing one of Etty's references to 'feet'. In another letter to Christine written from the concentration camp Etty writes of the great lesson of Matthew's Gospel⁵³ which Spier had taught her – to live for the day. And, after expressing acceptance of her own personal "extinction" [*ondergang*] she adds:

Every night, with sure peace of mind, I lay down my many earthly cares at the **feet** of God" (*Etty*, p. 631).

Four and half months later she is murdered at Auschwitz.

⁵³ She cites Matthew 24 but quotes Matthew 6. 34. "Take therefore no thought for the morrow; for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (*Etty*, p. 631)