

Etty Hillesum's hand-analysis, the prologue to her diaries

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Abstract

Ever since the publication of *An Interrupted Life*, it has been obvious that Etty Hillesum's first encounter with Julius Spier was a major steppingstone in her personal development. In this paper, it is argued that the notes made during their first meeting, i.e. the report of Spier's hand analysis dated 3 February 1941, are powerful evidence to back up this assumption. Several elements that Spier noticed about Hillesum through "reading" her hands, became themes in Hillesum's diaries. Consequently, the report can be viewed as the prologue to these diaries. However, to understand this particular text, first the content is examined and an amended, more easily readable version is presented.

On 3 February 1942, Etty Hillesum, Julius Spier and Adri Holm celebrated Hillesum's "spiritual birthday."¹ Precisely one year prior, Hillesum had had her hands analyzed by Spier and a few of his students, including Dicky de Jonge. The report on Hillesum's hand-analysis made by Holm in that session in 1941, was among the papers that De Jonge carefully safeguarded from her time as a student of Spier.

In this article, I will argue that Holm's report should be considered the prologue to Hillesum's diaries. To understand the importance of Spier's analysis, I will first examine the content of Holm's report on Hillesum's hands and then go on to present an amended, more easily readable version of this initial report.

¹ E.T., 558-559. *Het Werk*, 592-593; Letter 5, Etty Hillesum to Gera Bongers; Amsterdam, Friday morning, 6 February 1942. To celebrate the event, Hillesum prepared a long letter, now lost, that she called her "annual confession," cf. Alexandra Nagel & Denise de Costa, "'With You, I Have My Anchorage,' Fifteen Letters From Etty Hillesum to Julius Spier," in: Klaas Smelik, Gerrit Van Oord & Jurjen Wiersma (eds.), *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context: Writings, Life, and Influences of a Visionary Author* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 285-301, 291-292 (letter VIII).

Hillesum's protocol consists of a series of eighty-five statements

When a person attended Spier's course as the subject of study with the aim of having his/her hands analyzed by Spier and his students, one of the students present made a handprint of the "subject" for each student present at the meeting. Usually, the student making these handprints was the one who had invited the person to serve as a subject of study.

Additionally, one of the students took notes during the session. At the time Hillesum attended, this was often Adri Holm, but Dicky de Jonge was also willing to do this task. Afterwards, the note taker typed up copies of the notes for every student in attendance. In this way, all who had been present would get a copy to keep.

Julius Spier called the subject of study *Objekt* [Object, as if it was a name]. The final copy of the report from the notes of the hand-analysis was called the *Protokoll* [protocol]. Each protocol combined with the appropriate handprint, became a file in what was to become a reference book of sorts for Spier's students.²

Most files in De Jonge's extant collection are anonymous. In principle, the subjects were described only by their sex (male/female), age, and marital status (married/unmarried). Sometimes, the date of the session was included on the report, on the handprint, or both. Hillesum's file is marked as *Mädchen 27 J[ahr]* (see fig. 1). Several sentences in the three-page report, typed on thin paper by Adri Holm, give a clue that the unmarried girl, aged twenty-seven, was Etty Hillesum. On the corresponding handprint, De Jonge had scribbled a few notes (see fig. 2).

After making the handprints, Spier, the subject and the other students sat together around a table. They then observed the hands of the subject from three different positions. First, Object put his/her elbows firmly on the table, hands held up, and fingers pointing somewhat loosely toward the ceiling. The palm was held toward Object while Spier and his students viewed the backside of the pair of hands. The second posture had the subject put his/her hands flat on the table, the palms downwards. For the third posture, Object was asked to turn the hands 180 degrees, so the palms were visible to everyone. Between the first and the second postures, Spier gripped one of Object's hands to determine the "consistency." He did this with a particular grasp that allowed him to feel the structure of the hand, so he could conclude whether it was hard, weak or something in between.

² Information of Dicky van de Heuvel-de Jonge to the author, 20 November 2017.

Each of the three hand postures was designed to show particular aspects of the hands, for example, the whole hand, the individual fingers, the thumbs, the nails, the color of the skin, how the fingers connected to the lower part of the hand, how particular fingers “related” to other fingers, the lines and mounts in the palm, and differences between the left and the right hand. Step by step, all these features were observed and interpreted. Sometimes, when Spier wasn’t sure how to interpret a particular feature, he would ask Object a question in order to become a better, more defined understanding.

This three-phased procedure shows up in almost every protocol kept in De Jonge’s private collection. Each report consists the same type of chronologically ordered observations and interpretations beginning with observations of the hands held up, and ending with notes on the palms-up position. In Hillesum’s case, eighty statements can be identified on her protocol. In addition, De Jonge jotted down five statements on the sheet with Hillesum’s handprints.

The content of these statements varies from clear information written in German, to obscure psychochirological vocabulary. For instance, the comment on Hillesum’s “stiff thumb” on her left hand, mentioned that her thumb demonstrated “obstinacy; pretty much fixed on certain inner feelings” [*Starrer Daumen: Eigensinn; ziemlich stark auf gewisse innere Gefühlsvorstellungen fixiert*]. The remarks on her fingers say that she had a feel for rhythm [*Die Finger haben Gefühl für Rhythmus*], and a tendency to think [*Alle Finger zum Denken hingichtet*]. Yet the way in which Hillesum held some fingers tightly together, was interpreted as illustrating that she was inhibited and somewhat timid [*Finger eng zusammen gehalten: gehemmt, gewisse Ängstlichkeit*]. With regard to psychochirological vocabulary, one would have to know that Mercury was a hand-reader’s name for the pinky. Knowing this, one could understand the cryptic statement, “Mercury: excitable, in need of support, slightly irritated and shy” [*Merkur: anregbar, anlehnungsbedürftig, leicht irritiert und scheu*]. Basically, the shape and expression of Hillesum’s little finger informed Spier that Hillesum was “excitable” in nature, and “in need of support.”

Why or how the whole hand, its individual fingers, nails, lines and mounts related to its owner’s health, character, or even his or her upbringing, is a mystery. Spier couldn’t explain these connections; he simply believed that there was a correlation between a pair of hands and a person’s nervous system.

Many statements in Hillesum’s protocol combine a description of a hand-feature, and Spier’s interpretation of that particular feature. Often, the meaning was enclosed in the description itself. For example, the remark “pre-natal line” meant, according to Spier, that Etty Hillesum, while a fetus in her mother’s womb, was affected by an intense experience by

her mother during the pregnancy.³ Similarly, Spier's mention of a "line of prevention" indicates that he believed Hillesum to have a weak constitution, along with the tendency, unconsciously, to undertake counteractions as soon as she sensed an illness overtaking her.⁴

The report of Hillesum's hand-analysis is replete with abbreviations and idiosyncratic hand-reading terminology. It also contains various rather arbitrary statements. The text ultimately boils down, however, to a Jungian psychological report based on the inspection of Hillesum's hands. I have tried here to create an easier, more readable report. All the psychochirological jargon is eliminated, the repetitive fragments are cut to the essentials, and the remaining sentences are reorganized and rewritten. The result is the following report, still in sync with the original version, but written for the modern ear and eye.

The protocol: A psychological portrait of Ety Hillesum⁵

The subject of 3 February 1941, is a young, unmarried woman, twenty-seven years of age. She studies, and in order to earn an income, she helps in someone's household.

Object is extremely restless, very peckish, very sensitive, easily irritated and in a constant state of stress. She is stubborn and ambitious. At the same time she is shy and in need of recognition. She is artistic, can write well [*Schreibbegabung!*], has a lively, intuitive intelligence, possesses a sense of justice, a talent to observe; she has well-functioning senses, can adapt well to circumstances [*Fähigkeit zu guter Anpassung*], and is emotionally generous and warm-hearted. Despite her many talents, Object has in no area achieved anything of

³ Julius Spier, *The Hands of Children: An introduction to psycho-chirology*, foreword by Carl G. Jung; translated by Victor Grove (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1944), 79: "I have very often come across this line [the *Pre-natal Line*] in the many years of my practice, and as my observations have taught me that the mothers of children who possess this line have had a decisive and palpable experience during the period of pregnancy which definitely influenced the psychical development of the child."

⁴ Spier, *The Hands of Children*, 73: "[The *Line of Prevention*] very often appears in the hands of people of a more or less weak constitution who unconsciously try to counteract this by preventive measures."

⁵ Ria van den Brandt convinced me to do a proper text analysis of Hillesum's protocol. Thanks to her, I have been able to rewrite the hand-analysis report of *Mädchen*, 27 J.

consequence. Her thinking is sometimes quirky, sometimes tenacious with regard to holding certain inner ideas and feelings. Her energy is not balanced.

Object has a weak constitution. She suffers from a stuffy nose, stomach aches; she has problems with her throat, and many headaches. However, out of an unconscious impulse, she tries to take preventive measures.

Regarding sexuality, Object gets easily aroused [*erotisch sehr anregbar*]. This is so strong that it is probably problematic. She has had various relationships, and is receptive to effeminate men in the sense that she, mentally, is the more active one.

The cause of Object's problems is roughly twofold. There is a predisposition on the one hand (biological cause), and there is the environment of her upbringing on the other (psychological cause). Born with a strong capacity to think, Object is focused on the mind. However, she is little aware of her feelings. Her feelings naturally tend to the unconsciousness. Object inherited these tendencies from her parents. Her parents are very different. The father is healthy and physically strong, but also very nervous and a "loner." He is an academic and very rational. The mother, Russian, is an emotional person. She is very affective, quickly stimulated, (too) active, ambitious, and out of control. She has a predisposition to gastrointestinal problems. The mother is also intuitive and can formulate well. However, in her thinking, toward the end of her thought process, she undergoes a bizarre turn [*Mutter denkt logisch aber ganz zuletzt lässt sie eine bizarre Wendung in ihr Denken hineingehen*]. In their mutual relationship, the parents have not positively influenced each other. They have remained rather unaware.

While in the womb, Object was psychologically burdened by traumatic experiences of her mother. This burden has continued during Object's lifetime. Furthermore, the connection between Object and her mother is negative; between Object and her father the connection is positive. The philosophical nature of Object, and the respect she has for thinking, is reinforced by the positive bond with her father. Object naturally is impulsive, extroverted, and, like her mother, she can formulate well. She does not do so, however, to demonstrate her opposition to her mother. As a result of her unconscious, strong respect for thinking (the positive father bond), Object too often inhibits her feelings in daily life. When authentic feelings emerge, her thinking moves toward the critical and serves to reduce these feelings. Object's feelings are always interrupted by her thinking and lead, unconsciously, to an overload of feelings. Unaware of this process, more feelings fall down into the "unconscious" than rise up out of it. As a result, Object can no longer find relaxation in the outside world. Her feelings become over-stimulated, and abruptly and uncontrollably switch from activity to

passivity. To compensate for her many thoughts, Object lets herself fall back into unconscious feelings.

At the level of the soul, this has caused much clogging. This is the cause of the nasal and throat problems, the stomach complaints, the headaches. Also, Object neglects her body.

From the disunity between the parents and a lack of self-confidence, Object hasn't developed her talents. Still, she is much more independent within herself than she outwardly shows.

It is important to note that Object possesses a "tendency for development" [*Neigung zur Entwicklung*]. The key here is for her to become aware of her (unconscious) feelings. Therefore, Object must learn to regularly make herself passive, and not to let introversion take place only in response to overwhelming activities. Through awareness, she can learn to let her intelligence flow (instead of using it purely rationally), and she can learn to become aware of her weak emotional life (her feelings). The possibility for harmony exists.

Object needs friction with the outside world. The task inherent in her personal development is to find a balance between her feelings and her thinking. When Object is relieved of inhibitions, she has a great sense for children.

Past experiences ([often meaning relationships, AN]) that have left a mark in the palms of her hands, took place when Object was aged seventeen-eighteen, twenty-one, twenty-five, and between twenty-six and twenty-seven. Around her thirtieth year, an important event or experience will occur. (This last is a prediction, noted on the sheet with the handprints.)

In her diaries Hillesum refers to the hand-analysis more than once

Several elements in Etty Hillesum's hand-analysis seem remarkable. It is generally accepted that Spier knew nothing about Hillesum on Monday, 3 February 1941. In the session, Spier "saw" that Object had a weak constitution, acted more insecure outwardly than she felt inwardly, and that she had not been able to properly develop her many talents. Spier perceived that the main cause of Object's problems was the underdeveloped sense of awareness of her feelings. He ascertained upon meeting her, that her "biologically" inclined tendency to think more than to feel, had grown due to her positive father's bond posed against the negative bonding with her mother. This mattered mainly because – according to Spier – Hillesum's father was a very rational person, whereas her mother was emotional and intuitive.

This was seen as the root cause of why Hillesum constantly overruled her feelings in favor of her thoughts. Spier, however, appreciated that Hillesum had a capacity for personal development; he thought she would be able to overcome her problems. We can surmise that Spier's advice had been to start a diary in order to help Hillesum become aware of her inner life, her feelings. At the same time, writing a diary would activate her talent for writing.

On Friday, 7 March 1941, the day before Hillesum wrote Spier the letter that would become the opening page of her diaries, she held a private session with Spier. It is not certain if this was her first or second private meeting with the man who would eventually become her lover. It was during this 7 March session that Spier assured Hillesum that she was "not mad," but simply needed "to do a lot of work" on herself⁶. In other words, Spier repeated what he had said a month earlier, namely that she had the "tendency for development," and that the "possibility for harmony within herself" was genuine. Within days Hillesum began to write a diary.

Right from the beginning, there are direct, and sometimes indirect, references to the protocol from the hand-analysis encounter. For instance, the third sentence of her notes on 9 March 1941 reads, "The thoughts in my head are sometimes so clear and so sharp and my feelings so deep, but writing about them comes hard."⁷ This is Hillesum expressing in her own words what Spier had told her, namely that her thinking overruled her rather unconscious feelings. She felt the difficulty associated with writing about her feelings. It is easy to imagine his words ringing in her ears.

Ten days later, on 19 March 1941, Hillesum notes in her diary, "I catch myself with a need for music. I don't seem to be unmusical."⁸ According to the protocol, Hillesum had a "musical hand" [*Musikalische Hand*], and her fingers showed a feeling for rhythm [*Die Finger haben Gefühl für Rhythmus*]. Then on 24 March, she writes about wrestling with

⁶ E.T., 3. *Het Werk*, 3; Saturday, 8 March 1941: Und als ich von Ihnen nach Hause fuhr, hätte ich gern überfahren werden wollen von einem Auto und dachte: Ach ja, ich werde auch wohl verrückt sein sowie meine ganze Familie, ein Gedanke, den ik immer bekomme, wenn ich mich irgendwo verzweifelt fühle. Aber jetzt weiß ich schon wieder, daß ich das nicht bin, nur daß ich noch sehr viel an mir selber arbeiten muß um ein erwachsener und hunderprozentiger Mensch zu werden.

⁷ E.T., 4. *Het Werk*, 4; Sunday, 9 March 1941: De gedachten zijn soms zo klaar en helder in het hoofd en de gevoelens zo diep, maar opschrijven, dat wil nog niet.

⁸ E.T., 33. *Het Werk*, 34; Wednesday, 19 March 1941: Ik betrap mezelf op een behoefte aan muziek. Ik schijn niet onmuzikaal te zijn [...].

Spier, an experience that had aroused erotic feelings in her. “Well, my friend,” she writes, “you ought to know just how ‘excitable’ I am, because you told me so yourself.”⁹ This links to the statement in the protocol: “Mercury [the little finger] is rigid below, alive above: erotically very ‘exitable’” [*Merkur ist unten starr, oben lebendig: erotisch sehr anregbar*]. In the beginning of August 1941, Hillesum again refers to Spier having told her that she had a talent for writing. “He also once said: ‘Well, you are born writer’.”¹⁰ On 22 October 1941, Hillesum herself adopts psychochirological lingo in writing, “Luckily, my Jupiter is not my biggest mount, Apollo-Mercury is even bigger.”¹¹ And a month later she takes up Spier’s views on her relationship with her mother. “I have an unresolved antipathy for my mother, and that is precisely why I do the things that I abhor in her.”¹²

Hillesum’s diary writing also reveals that she followed up on issues regarding her physical well-being,

I used to think that headaches, stomach aches, rheumatism and similar disagreeable conditions were nothing but physical, but now I can see in myself that their main causes are psychological. Body and soul are very much one in my case. The moment something goes wrong with my psyche something goes wrong with my body as well. That is why mental hygiene is so terribly important for me. The great gain of these past six months is that I have become aware of that and that I shall no longer put me blame on my body.¹³

⁹ E.T., 44. *Het Werk*, 47; Monday morning, 24 March 1941: Ik dacht toen wel zoiets van: Ja ventje, jij moet toch drommels goed weten, hoe erotisch “anregbar” ik ben, dat heb je me zelf verteld [...].

¹⁰ E.T., 74. *Het Werk*, 78; Tuesday, 5 August 1941: Hij zei ook een keer: Sie sind ja die geborene Schriftstellerin.

¹¹ E.T., 137. *Het Werk*, 47; Wednesday afternoon, 22 October 1941: Jupiter is bij mij gelukkig toch niet het grootste, Apol. Merkur is de nog grotere berg.

¹² E.T., 44. *Het Werk*, 154; Friday, 21 November 1941: [...] ik heb een oppositie tegen m’n moeder, die is nog steeds niet in elkaar gezakt, en daarom doe ik die dingen, die ik in haar verafschuw, precies zo.

¹³ E.T., 121; *Het Werk*, 128; Sunday afternoon, 5 October 1941: Vroeger heb ik gemeend, dat die lichamelijke onprettige toestanden, zoals hoofdpijn, maagpijn, reumatische verschijnselen, ook alleen maar lichamen waren, maar ik kan nu aan mezelf constateren dat ze in hoofdzaak psychisch bedingt zijn. Lichaam en ziel zijn heel sterk één bij mij. Zodra er iets stukt in de ziel, zit het ook in het lichaam. Daarom is hygiëne v.d. ziel zo verschrikkelijk belangrijk voor me. Het is de winst van het

True, I've got a headache and a stomach ache right now, but I am no longer in their thrall as I used to be [...].¹⁴

As these two passages show, Hillesum noted progress in her efforts to become healthier, and more balanced. Another clear reference to Spier's initial "diagnosis" concerns the progress she felt she was making with regard to her strong need to fall back into solitude so that her unconscious feelings could take flight if she felt herself overstrained herself by the outside world. On 22 April 1942 she shared in a letter to Henny Tideman (copied in her diary), "At certain fixed times – though less and less often now – I have a tremendous need to cut myself off; to be quite alone for a while."¹⁵

Conclusion

In short, ever since the publication of *An Interrupted Life*, a selection of Hillesum's diary, it has been obvious that Hillesum's first encounter with Julius Spier was a major stepping stone in her personal development. The notes of the hand-analysis made during the February 1941 meeting, are now powerful evidence to back up that assumption. What is more, the fact that several passages in Hillesum's diaries can be traced back to the protocol from that first meeting, indicates that the original hand-analysis was a kind of reference point for Hillesum. The report was indeed, a prologue to Hillesum's diaries.

laatste halve jaar, dat ik dat heel bewust weet en ik zal de schuld ook nooit meer aan m'n lichaam kunnen geven.

¹⁴ E.T., 253; *Het Werk*, 263, Sunday evening, 22 February 1942: Ja, het is waar, ik heb nu hoofdpijn en maagpijn, maar ik word daar niet meer door beheerst, zoals vroeger.

¹⁵ E.T., 336. *Het Werk*, 351; Wednesday morning, 22 April 1942: Op gezette tijden – maar met steeds grote tussenpozen, komt dat bij me terug: een verschrikkelijk sterke behoefte me af te zonderen en tijdenlang helemaal alleen te zijn.

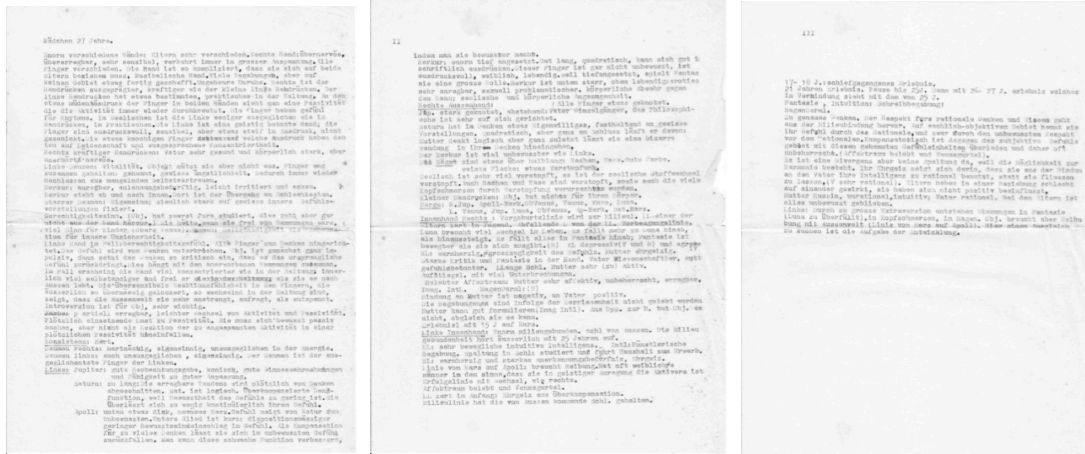


Fig. 1. Report of the hand-analysis of Etty Hillesum, 3 February 1941 (archive Dicky van de Heuvel-de Jonge).

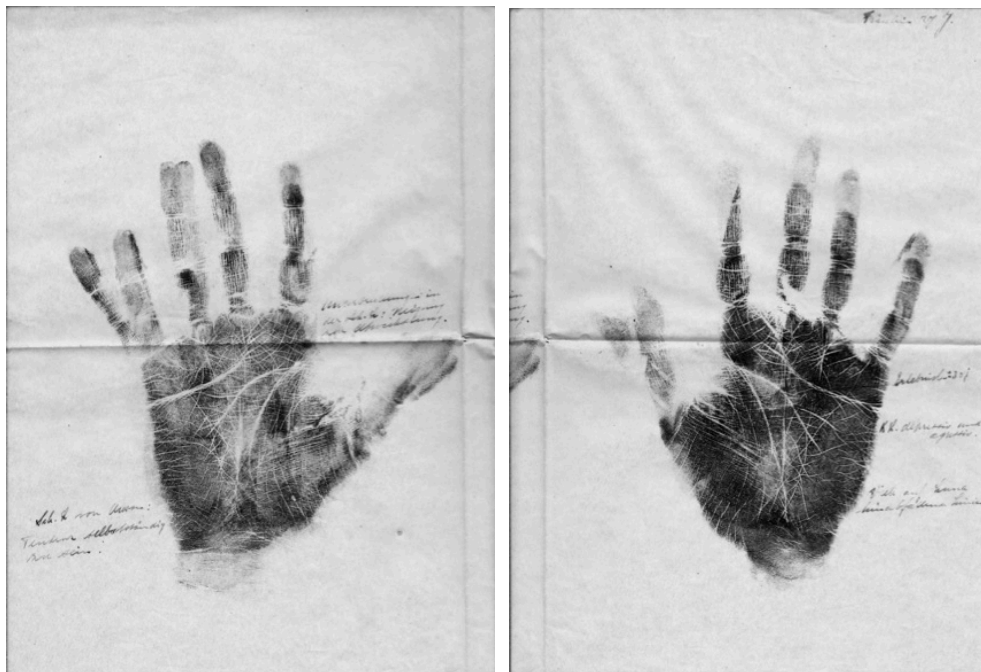


Fig. 2. The hand-prints of Etty Hillesum, 3 February 1941 (archive Dicky van de Heuvel-de Jonge).