

Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum

Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy

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Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum

Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at
Ghent University, November 2008

Edited by

Klaas A.D. Smelik, Ria van den Brandt,
and Meins G.S. Coetsier

with the assistance of

Carolyn Coman, Debbie Pevenage,
and Gerrit Van Oord



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This book is dedicated to Etty Hillesum (1914–1943),
chronicler of her people

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We are grateful to the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam for the permission to publish the photographs in illustrations 1–15.

FOREWORD

The diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum (1914–1943) have a special place among the Jewish-Dutch testimonies of the *Shoah* (Holocaust). They contain not only a description of Camp Westerbork during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, but also reflect Hillesum's important, though unfortunately interrupted existential search of a spiritual, philosophical and literary nature. Many years after her death in the extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, the diaries have received worldwide attention and inspired hundred of thousands of readers.

We have the honour to present here the proceedings of the international Etty Hillesum Congress organized by the Etty Hillesum Research Centre of Ghent University in November 2008, in cooperation with the Heyendaal Research Program of the Faculty of Religious Studies of the Radboud University Nijmegen and the Institutum Iudaicum, Interuniversity Centre for the Academic Study of Judaism in Belgium. The aim of this congress was to invite Hillesum scholars from all over the world to exchange insights and to discuss problems that arise when studying Etty Hillesum's writings. About twenty speakers presented their papers and the American actress Susan Stein gave a performance of her theatre play about Etty Hillesum.

In this volume, all the papers of the congress have been included in a revised and annotated version. Looking back at the congress with gratitude, we would like to thank the various people and organisations that have made this meeting possible. First of all, we thank all those who accepted our invitation to attend the congress and by their enthusiasm and their dedication to Etty Hillesum and her literary heritage made it unforgettable for us. We especially thank those who presented their papers, Susan Stein for her most impressive performance, and the rector of Ghent University, Professor Paul Van Cauwenberge, for his cordial welcome at the beginning of the congress. Special thanks also to Carolyn Coman, Debbie Pevenage and Gerrit Van Oord, whose assistance in editing the text has proven most helpful and whose enthusiasm has given us strength and courage.

A number of organisations and institutions provided us with the indispensable financial aid, which enabled us to realize the congress in the beautiful surroundings of 't Pand in Ghent. In alphabetical order,

they are the Etty Hillesum Foundation, Amsterdam, Ghent University, Institutum Judaicum, Radboud University Nijmegen and Research Foundation—Flanders (FWO). We wish to express our sincere thanks for their support.

We are very grateful to the editors of the *Supplements to the Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* who made it possible to publish these proceedings in their series. And we like to thank Jennifer Pavelko, Katelyn Chin, and Michael Mozina of Brill Boston for their continuous support and patience.

We end with an important piece of advice to the reader. The quotations from Etty Hillesum's writings are taken from *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941–1943* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). This complete English translation by Arnold J. Pomerans of Etty Hillesum's literary heritage is indicated with the abbreviation E.T. In a footnote, the reader will find the original Dutch (or German) text, quoted from the fifth edition of *Etty: De nagelaten geschriften van Etty Hillesum* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2008). We hope that this will encourage our readers to compare the translation with the original.

23 March 2010

Klaas A.D. Smelik, Ria van den Brandt
& Meins G.S. Coetsier

WELCOME SPEECH BY THE RECTOR OF GHENT
UNIVERSITY, PROFESSOR PAUL VAN CAUWENBERGE,
AT THE OPENING OF THE ETTY HILLESUM CONGRESS
ON MONDAY EVENING 24 NOVEMBER 2008

Ladies and gentlemen,

The motto of Ghent University is: *Durf Denken* ('Dare to think'). I assume that if Etty Hillesum were still alive today, she would see herself reflected in our motto. Hence, Ghent University is the ideal location for this international congress dedicated to Etty Hillesum's life and writings. This congress has brought you together from countries all over the world: Canada, the United States, Ireland, Great-Britain, Portugal, Spain, Italy, France and the Low Countries near the Sea.

Etty Hillesum lived in a time when thinking and questioning (Dutch: *durf denken*) had become increasingly dangerous, even life-threatening. From the outset, National Socialism opposed free thought, which it considered a threat to the German people. Within four months of the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Reich Chancellor, this became painfully clear. Works demonstrating free thought were deemed inconsistent with Nazi ideology and were publicly burned.

On 10 May 1933, on the Opernplatz in Berlin, the S.A. and Nazi youth groups burned approximately 20,000 books from the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft and the Humboldt University; including works by Heinrich Heine, Thomas Mann, Karl Marx, Erich Maria Remarque and H.G. Wells. Student groups throughout Germany carried out their own book burnings on that day and during the following weeks. The German-Jewish poet Heinrich Heine has said "Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man auch am Ende Menschen" ('Where they burn books, in the end they also burn people'). And he was right.

In occupied Europe, free thought lead to arrests and deportation. One was better off not thinking, in order to avoid taking risks. Likewise, for the victims of Nazi-Germany's racial politics, who irrespective of their political beliefs were arrested and then deported to be murdered, the only solution seemed to be not to think, and even, yes, not to feel. Those who really reflected on what the Nazis intended to do to the Jews in Europe, were likely to lose all courage. Jews who

allowed their feelings to arise in this inhuman situation, were overwhelmed by despair. In a diary entry on Saturday 3 October 1942, Etty Hillesum expressed the feelings of the Jewish prisoners in the Dutch transit camp Westerbork:

At night, as I lay in the camp on my plank bed, surrounded by women and girls gently snoring, dreaming aloud, quietly sobbing and tossing and turning, women and girls who often told me during the day, “We don’t want to think, we don’t want to feel, otherwise we are sure to go out of our minds,” I was sometimes filled with an infinite tenderness, and lay awake for hours letting all the many, too many impressions of a much-too-long day wash over me, and I prayed, “Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks.” And that is what I want to be again. The thinking heart of a whole concentration camp.

Contrary to the tendency of her fellow prisoners who wanted neither to think or to feel, Etty Hillesum asserted her desire to do just that: to think. She wanted to think not only for herself but for others with whom she felt connected. She wanted to be “the thinking heart of the barracks.” These words may sound pretentious, but what Etty Hillesum meant to say becomes clear in a letter that was illegally published during the war, which described her life in Camp Westerbork:

It is not easy—and no doubt less easy for us Jews than for anyone else—yet if we have nothing to offer a desolate post-war world but our bodies saved at any cost, if we fail to draw new meaning from the deep wells of our distress and despair, then it will not be enough. New thoughts will have to radiate outward from the camps themselves, new insights, spreading lucidity, will have to cross the barbed wire enclosing us and join with the insights that people outside will have to earn just as bloodily, in circumstances that are slowly becoming almost as difficult. And perhaps, on the common basis of an honest search for some way to understand these dark events, wrecked lives may yet take a tentative step forward.

That’s why it seemed such a great danger to me when all around one could hear, “We don’t want to think, we don’t want to feel, it’s best to shut your eyes to all this misery.”

As if suffering—in whatever form and however it may come to us—were not also part of human existence.

It was an immense task that Hillesum assigned herself and her generation: “New thoughts will have to radiate outward from the camps themselves, new insights, spreading lucidity, will have to cross the barbed wire enclosing us and join with the insights that people outside will have to earn just as bloodily, in circumstances that are slowly becoming almost as difficult.”

Post 1945 history shows that these new thoughts and new insights were certainly not concretely realized over night. It took many years before there really was peace in Europe, and certainly not without struggle, as the horrific civil war in former Yugoslavia has shown. And it took a number of years before what we call in Dutch *vijanddenken* (literary: ‘enemy-thinking’) was brought to discussion in Europe: it is not evident anymore to divide the world in good and bad guys but the development of ‘new thinking’ as a result of the war has taken much more time than one would expect.

We can demonstrate this by looking at the fate of Etty Hillesum’s diaries themselves. In the 1950s, there was hardly any interest in her writings among publishers, but in the 1980s, the situation had changed: the selection from the diaries, which was published in 1982 with the title *Het verstoorde leven* (‘An Interrupted Life’), became a global success: high sales and numerous editions and translations from Brazil to Japan. The time was right and readers wanted to know more about this ‘new thinking’ of Etty Hillesum, which coincided so wonderfully with the current way of life.

The development of “new thoughts” requires inner freedom. Daring to think (Dutch: *durven denken*) implies that we are courageous enough to depart from old and established ways of thinking in order to go down roads we never would have thought of travelling, making sure never to become a prisoner of ideology—no matter what ideology presents itself. This approach is apparent in a subsequent passage from Hillesum’s diaries that refers to a debate between her friends Julius Spier and Werner Levi, discussing the significance of Jesus. She noted the following:

On Friday [28 November, 1941] evening a discussion between S. and L. about Christ and the Jews. Two Worldviews, sharply defined, brilliantly presented, rounded off; defended with passion and vigour. But I can’t help feeling that every hotly championed Worldview hides a little lie. That “the truth” is always violated.

It is important to note that both debaters were German Jews: Spier as well as Levi. But Spier’s search had brought him in contact with Carl Gustav Jung and thus closer to Christianity. His opponent, the theatre director Werner Levi, defended the Jewish position, whereby Jesus as Messiah is radically rejected. Though the two men did their best to make their points, Etty Hillesum maintained reservations: she felt that both opponents adapted the truth to resonate with their own convictions more than it actually did. Etty Hillesum did not want to bind

herself to one particular ideology. She wanted to retain her freedom and to make her own judgments, to think for herself and to search for her own way of thinking.

But daring to think (Dutch: *durven denken*) is not an optional choice, nor is it a matter of retreating to an ivory tower. Daring to think should stem from a deep involvement with other people. When Etty Hillesum wrote: “Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks,” she meant that she would like to reflect on the meaning of her own experience, as well as the experiences of the Jewish people and the *Zeitgeist* in general. In a passage in which she addressed God, she wrote:

As I walk through the streets I am forced to think a great deal about Your world. *Think* is not really the right word, it is more an attempt to plumb its mystery with a new sense. It often seems to me that I can already discern the beginning and the end of this one phase of history, already see it in perspective. And I am deeply grateful to You for leaving me so free of bitterness and hate, with so much calm acceptance, which is not at all the same as defeatism, and also with some understanding for our age, strange though that may sound. One must understand one’s age just as one understands one’s contemporaries, for, after all, it is of their making, it is what it is and must be understood as such, however perplexing it may be.—

This understanding of the historical situation in which she and her people lived, should lead to “new thoughts,” to an understanding that would make the earth more liveable for the human race after the war. It is her contribution to a new future, her legacy for generations to come:

I wish I could live for a long time so that one day I may know how to explain it, and if I am not granted that wish, well, then somebody else will perhaps do it, carry on from where my life has been cut short. And that is why I must try to live a good and faithful life to my last breath: so that those who come after me do not have to start all over again, need not face the same difficulties. Isn’t that doing something for future generations?

We are that generation about which Etty Hillesum wrote. We live in freedom and can think freely without fear of losing our lives. This seems obvious, but it is not. Still, there are enough countries in the world where freedom of thought is regarded as a threat to the state’s interest. And even in democratic countries, there are active forces that would like to ban free thinking. Daring to think (Dutch: *durven denken*) is not only a challenge for us but a necessary duty.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you all fruitful days together, an open exchange of experiences and ideas and a joint cooperation in developing new thoughts for future generations.

Welcome to the Ghent University!

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Wil van den Bercken (1946) is a Slavist and professor extraordinaire of Russian Church history at the Radboud University in Nijmegen. His publications include: *Ideology and Atheism in the Soviet Union* (Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989) and *Holy Russia and Christian Europe* (London: SCM Press, 1999). His most recent book is *Christian Fiction and Religious Realism in the Novels of Dostoevsky* (London: Anthem Press, 2010).

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Denise de Costa (1958) wrote the first Ph.D. dissertation on Etty Hillesum: *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: Inscribing Spirituality and Sexuality* (Rutgers University Press 1999, translation of the 1996 Dutch edition). She has written several books and articles on Etty Hillesum, spirituality and women's lives. Her most recent work is a historical study on the unique location where she lives: *Wonen in een klooster: Clarissen, Theresiaantjes, gastarbeiders en kunstenaars* (Zwolle: d'jonge Hond, 2010).

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Frits Grimmelikhuisen (1937) studied philosophy and music. He taught at the Theatre High school in Arnhem and worked as music-therapist in a mental hospital. Since 1973, he has performed worldwide with—what he calls—a ‘paper theatre’, and has a small theatre at home in Deventer. In 1995, Grimmelikhuisen and his wife Manja Pach founded the Etty Hillesum Centre in Deventer. He has written various articles on Etty Hillesum and in 2004 he created a theatre piece based on her texts. In 2010, he hopes to finish his book on Etty Hillesum and Rilke.

Paul Lebeau (1924) entered the Jesuit novitiate in 1943. He studied in Belgium, the United States, Austria and France. Since 1961, he has taught theology at the Institut d’Études Théologiques, Faculté de Théologie de la Compagnie de Jésus, Brussels (Belgium). He wrote several works on the Church Fathers, the ecumenical movement, the origins of Christian art and the anthropology of monastic life. From 1993 to 1998, he was director of the *Foyer Catholique Européen*, a meetingpoint and retreat centre for the members of the European institutions in Brussels. His book *Etty Hillesum: Un itinéraire spirituel. Amsterdam 1941–Auschwitz 1943* was published in 1998.

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Nadia Neri (1946) is a psychoanalyst and member of the Italian and International Jungian Association. She is the author of *Oltre l'ombra: Donne intorno a Jung* (Rome: Borla, 1995), which was translated into French, *Femmes autour de Jung* (Cahiers de psychologie jungiennes, 2002). Neri's book on Hillesum is titled *Un'estrema compassione: Etty Hillesum, testimone e vittima del lager* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 1999). She works and lives in Rome.

Maria Gabriella Nocita (1977) is a Ph.D. student in Theory, History and Methods of Education at the LUMSA University of Rome. She collaborates with the Department of Education and Teaching Methodology Planning of the University Roma Tre in the Research Laboratory of Pedagogy of Expression. Her studies focus in particular on the Philosophy of Education. She is the author of the essay "Sentire la vita: Etty Hillesum si fa parola," in: *La comunicazione umanante: Erme-neusi di un mistero*, ed. G. Scaramuzza (Rome: Aracne, 2009).

Gerrit Van Oord (1948) was born in Indonesia and grew up in the Netherlands. Van Oord studied philosophy in Amsterdam and left for Italy in 1982. After twelve years of teaching Dutch language and literature in Rome, he and his wife Maria Korporal founded the publishing house Apeiron Editori in the early 1990s. His research, writing and publishing on Etty Hillesum began in 1986 with the first international seminar on Etty Hillesum in Rome (1989). He edited *L'esperienza dell' Altro: Studi su Etty Hillesum* in 1990, and together with Fulvio Manara he is editor of the periodical *Con Etty: Quaderni di informazione e ricerca*.

Manja Pach (1945) studied law at the University of Amsterdam. She worked thirty years as a judge at several courts. She is (co)founder of the Westerbork Memorial Centre and cofounder and first chairman of the board of the Etty Hillesum Centre in Deventer, founded to keep

alive the memory of the Deventer Jews, and to promote the writings of Etty Hillesum. She is also the chairman of the board of the Foundation “de Dierense Sjoel.”

Debbie Pevenage (1985) studied Germanic languages at Ghent University. In 2007, she was awarded Master of Arts in Linguistics and Literature in Germanic Languages (Dutch and German). Her thesis on Etty Hillesum, directed by Professor Klaas Smelik, was entitled “‘Het harmonisch rollen uit Gods hand lukte niet zo erg’: Worsteling en evenwicht in de dagboeken van Etty Hillesum.” Pevenage is a secondary school teacher and staff member of the Etty Hillesum Research Centre (EHOOC). Currently, she continues her research on Hillesum’s writings.

Alexandra Pleshoyano (1962) wrote her Ph.D. dissertation in 2007 on *Etty Hillesum: l’amour comme ‘seule solution’: Une herméneutique théologique au coeur du mal*, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Hermann Häring, Dr. Ria van den Brandt and Prof. Dr. Klaas A.D. Smelik. The book was published the same year at LIT Verlag. She did her postdoctoral research (2007–2009) at the KUL (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) and published a second book on Etty Hillesum: *J’avais encore mille choses à te demander: L’univers intérieur d’Etty Hillesum*. She is now associate professor at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Sherbrooke in Quebec, Canada, and is writing a book on the Jewish religious figures present in Leonard Cohen’s work.

Brendan Purcell (1941) studied philosophy at University College Dublin, and theology at the Lateran University in Rome, and was ordained a priest for Dublin diocese in 1967. He began a doctorate in the psychology of interpersonal relations at the University of Leuven, and taught psychology and philosophy at University College Dublin (UCD) from 1972 until retirement in 2008. He has published *The Drama of Humanity: Towards a Philosophy of Humanity in History* and with Detlev Clemens edited and translated Eric Voegelin’s *Hitler and the Germans*. At present, he is completing a book on human origins in the light of creation and evolution.

Bettine Siertsema (1955) studied Dutch Literature in Amsterdam. In 2007, she obtained her doctoral degree with a dissertation on Dutch autobiographical literature on the concentration camps. She holds a

research position at the Faculty of Philosophy of the *Vrije Universiteit* in Amsterdam. Siertsema wrote “The Burden of Responsibility and Guilt: Memoirs and Fiction on the ‘Grey Zone,’” in: *Mis/Representing Evil: Evil in an Interdisciplinary Key*, ed. Charlene P.E. Burns (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2009), 149–168; “Kampgetuigenissen: Herinnering in teksten,” in: *De dynamiek van de herinnering: Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog in een internationale context*, eds. Frank van Vree & Rob van der Laarse, (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2009), 106–127. Her present research focuses on the representation of the Holocaust perpetrator in literature.

Klaas A.D. Smelik (1950) was born in the Netherlands and studied Theology, Semitic Languages and Ancient History in Utrecht, Amsterdam and Leiden. He taught Old Testament and Hebrew in Utrecht, Amsterdam and Brussels, and Jewish History at the K.U. Leuven. Since 2005, he has taught Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Ghent University and is director of the Etty Hillesum Research Centre (EHOC) there. He edited the Dutch and English unabridged editions of Etty Hillesum’s writings and, together with Ria van den Brandt, the *Etty Hillesum Studies*. He has (as writer or editor) published around 30 books and 200 articles on the Hebrew Bible, ancient Hebrew inscriptions, ancient history, Jewish studies, anti-Semitism, and Etty Hillesum. This year, he will publish a book on the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Patrick Woodhouse (1947) is Canon of Wells Cathedral in Somerset, England, where he is responsible for music and liturgy. He has led many retreats and study days on the life and writings of Etty Hillesum in the United Kingdom, and in January 2009 his book *Etty Hillesum, a Life Transformed*, with a Foreword by Archbishop Rowan Williams, was published by Continuum. He has a particular interest in inter-faith issues and regularly takes groups to South India to explore contemplative spirituality as practised in different faith traditions.

INTRODUCTION

Ria van den Brandt
(Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands)

From the very beginning, the Dutch publication of *Het verstoorde leven* ('An interrupted life') in 1981 was an overwhelming success. Soon afterwards, many translations were published and Etty Hillesum went—as she wished during her life—worldwide.¹ An irreversible international and colourful reception commenced, along with extreme reactions such as hagiographic admiration, identification, lack of understanding and rejection. Everybody seemed to know the truth about Etty Hillesum. It is noteworthy, however, that the worldwide reception was based on an incomplete and unreliable selection of Hillesum's texts. The publisher, Jan Geurt Gaarlandt, reveals in this volume how he at the time managed to edit a book out of "a small unattractive pile of papers," given to him by Klaas A.D. Smelik. The success of this selection exceeded his expectations. What was going on? In the early 1980's, Gaarlandt published two more selections,² but it was obvious that a complete and scholarly edition of Hillesum's texts was required. The Etty Hillesum Foundation in Amsterdam asked Klaas A.D. Smelik to address this need. The Dutch edition of all available texts of Hillesum was published five years after the first edition of *Het verstoorde leven*. Jan Geurt Gaarlandt gave it the title: *Etty: De nagelaten geschriften van Etty Hillesum, 1941–1943*.³ In this way, a unique testimony of a Jewish woman—ten diary notebooks and many letters—became known in our world.

A few years later, in 1989, Gaarlandt expressed his astonishment about the many reviews and essays on Hillesum: "It's shocking to read

¹ Meanwhile, the diaries have been translated in 17 languages: Catalan, Czech, Danish, English, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Modern Hebrew, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Slovenian, Spanish and Swedish. A Russian translation is in preparation.

² Etty Hillesum, *Het denkende hart van de barak: Brieven van Etty Hillesum*, with an introduction of J.G. Gaarlandt (Haarlem: De Haan, 1982); Etty Hillesum, *In duizend zoete armen: Nieuwe dagboekantekeningen van Etty Hillesum*, with an introduction of J.G. Gaarlandt (Haarlem: De Haan, 1984).

³ Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik; text edition: Gideon Lodders & Rob Tempelaars (Amsterdam: Balans, 1986).

how many different aspects one can discover in her life and work. Literary, mystical, philosophical, historical, theological, psychological and therapeutic and therapeutic perspectives have generated material for many essays. She is compared and connected to people like Kafka, Meister Eckhart, Ruusbroec, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Rilke, Jung, Seneca, Carry van Bruggen, Bonhoeffer, important representatives of literature, theology and philosophy. It has been said that her diary belongs to the most important documents of this century.”⁴ Nevertheless, it was sixteen years before this apparently significant document was translated into English—*Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941–1943*,⁵ followed in 2008 by the French translation—*Etty Hillesum: Les écrits d’Etty Hillesum, Journaux et lettres 1941–1943*.⁶ Meanwhile, the colourful but also controversial reception of Hillesum’s writings continued. Numerous books and essays were written, conferences and seminars organized, classes given and artistic productions created. Hillesum’s ‘small voice’ travelled around the world and went through many interpretations. Each language, each cultural domain, seemed to produce different images of Etty Hillesum.⁷ At the same time, the diverse readings showed remarkable similarities and unexpected connections.⁸ An international exchange of ideas and perspectives seemed to be mandatory.

In November 2008, we organized an international conference on Etty Hillesum at the University of Ghent,⁹ focusing on two central themes of Hillesum’s work: spirituality and writing. Scholars and Hillesum commentators from all over the world came to Ghent to

⁴ Jan Geurt Gaarlandt, “Men zou een pleister op vele wonden willen zijn,” in: *Men zou een pleister op vele wonden willen zijn: Reacties op de dagboeken en brieven van Etty Hillesum*, ed. J.G. Gaarlandt (Amsterdam: Balans, 1989), X.

⁵ Translated by Arnold J. Pomerans; published by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, U.K.) and Novalis (Saint Paul University, Ottawa).

⁶ Translated by Philippe Noble & Isabelle Rossalin; published by Seuil, Paris.

⁷ Cf. Ria van den Brandt & Klaas A.D. Smelik, “Etty Hillesum in facetten: Inleiding,” in: *Etty Hillesum in facetten*, Etty Hillesum Studies 1, eds. Ria van den Brandt & Klaas A.D. Smelik (Budel: Damon, 2003), 9–18.

⁸ Cf. Yukiko Yokohata, “Het beeld van Etty Hillesum in Japan,” in: *Etty Hillesum in context*, Etty Hillesum Studies 2, eds. Ria van den Brandt & Klaas A.D. Smelik (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2007), 95–115.

⁹ Organized by the Etty Hillesum Research Centre, Ghent University, in cooperation with the Institutum Iudaicum, Interuniversity Centre for the Academic Study of Judaism in Belgium, and the Heyendaal Research Program of the Faculty of Religious Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen.

give their papers. This volume, *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum*, presents their texts and shows their different premises, approaches, disciplinary tools and future perspectives on Hillesum research and reception.

Biography

Who was Etty Hillesum? Many things are said about her, but what are the ‘plain facts’? In “A Short Biography of Etty Hillesum,” *Klaas A.D. Smelik* gives an historical outline of her life, starting with her birth on 15 January 1914 in Middelburg. Etty Hillesum was born Esther Hillesum into a Jewish family. Her father Louis Hillesum was a classicist, and her mother Rebecca Bernstein, a teacher of Russian language, was a Russian refugee. Etty Hillesum had two brothers, Jaap (1916) and Mischa (1920), both very talented but mentally unstable. After completing the gymnasium in Deventer, Etty Hillesum went to Amsterdam to study law. She took her master exams in Dutch Law in 1939 and studied Slavonic languages as well. The war prevented her from completing this study, but she continued to learn and teach Russian. In 1937, Etty Hillesum took a room in the house of the accountant and widower Han Wegerif (Gabriel Metsustraat in Amsterdam). She was not only Wegerif’s housekeeper but also his lover. In 1941, after meeting the psycho-chirologist Julius Spier, Hillesum decided to go into therapy with him and started a diary. Keeping a diary was not only therapeutic. It also nourished her early literary ambitions and her later drive to be a chronicler of the fate of the Jewish people in her time. A remarkable and essential characteristic of Etty Hillesum’s diary, however, is her psychological and spiritual development, strongly influenced by Julius Spier, with whom she had an intimate relationship. Meanwhile, the anti-Jewish measures increasingly impacted Etty Hillesum’s life. In July 1942, Hillesum applied for a position within the *Joodsche Raad* (‘Jewish Council’) and received an appointment to an Amsterdam office of this organization. Shortly afterwards, she asked to be transferred to the department of ‘Social Welfare for People in Transit’ at Camp Westerbork. In 1942, she had three short stays at this transit camp. Illness forced her to go back to Amsterdam. She returned to Amsterdam for the last time on 5 December 1942, and stayed there until her departure on 6 June 1943. On 5 July 1943, the special status granted to personnel at the Camp Westerbork section

of the Jewish Council came to an end. On 7 September 1943, Etty Hillesum was deported to Auschwitz. According to the Red Cross, she died at Auschwitz-Birkenau on 30 November 1943.

Spirituality and God

Etty Hillesum's life underwent a profound process of change in a very short time. In his essay "The Roots of the Chaos, and the Process of Change in Etty Hillesum," *Patrick Woodhouse* stresses this aspect of Hillesum's process. He analyzes her early diary texts, focusing on her reports of inner chaos. What were the roots of this chaos? Hillesum herself pointed to her family, especially to her parents. She recognized in her father's philosophical nihilism signs of despair and helplessness, and Etty Hillesum found this threatening. Her mother's character was rather capricious and chaotic, and made life in the Hillesum household impossible. According to Woodhouse, Etty Hillesum's parents were "two emotionally inadequate people," not able to help their own children. Hillesum herself called her parents' home a "madhouse" and was very aware of the mental instability of her two brothers. The Hillesum children were not really brought up in a "home," but in "a void, a sense of muddled and chaotic emptiness." And these circumstances, says Woodhouse, "are the roots of the chaos which is such a constant theme in the earlier part of the diary." He continues that Hillesum's process of healing and change started when she moved into the home of the sixty-two year old widower Han Wegerif. There she found *another* home: "Wegerif was a tolerant, undemanding, and kind man. As well as the emotional security that she needed, he gave her the sexual intimacy she craved, and provided a safe place for her to come home to. But he could not meet her intellectual needs, nor could he help her dig down into the roots of her own profound discontent, and discover its origins, and so begin to find healing." According to Woodhouse, Hillesum immediately recognized in Spier someone who had the psychological skills to help her. "Whatever his attachment to the rather bizarre practice of psycho-chirology, he was undoubtedly an immensely gifted person as well as a remarkably spiritual man who had been in analysis with Gustav Carl Jung and had worked with him." Spier gave Hillesum "the security, insight and confidence she needed to begin to deal with her own recurring depressions, her suicidal tendencies, and her fear of madness. And he helped her begin to discover,

beneath the chaos of her psyche, a self that was truer and deeper than the shallow and driven girl that she had been.” The first notebooks of Hillesum’s diary are dominated by her relationship with Spier, but it is through this special relationship that “she found herself, for the first time in her life, deeply understood and accepted in all her inner muddle and confusion by someone else who loved her.” She seemed to break through into an inner ground, found her deepest ‘self.’ She considered Spier the midwife of the birth of her soul. At the root of her spirituality was ‘acceptance,’ as she writes herself: “Paradoxical though it may sound: S. heals people by teaching them how to suffer and to accept.” This was at the heart of her first transformation, but many transformations followed. A sign of her transformed personality was her totally changed relationship with her parents.

Like Woodhouse, *Alexandra Pleshoyano* considers Julius Spier—along with Rainer Maria Rilke—the main source of Hillesum’s spirituality. Indeed, it was Hillesum herself, she says, who identified Spier as the mediator between her and God. Pleshoyano wittingly prefers to speak about ‘Spieruality’ and entitles her essay “Etty Hillesum and Julius Spier: A ‘Spieruality’ on the Fringe of Religious Borders.” The author analyzes Hillesum’s notebooks chronologically and demonstrates how Spier introduced Hillesum to different sources of spiritual influences. From Spier, Hillesum “learned the importance of self-discipline in all areas of her life.” He was the teacher who “helped her to probe the depths of herself wherein she encountered what she chose to call ‘God.’” Pleshoyano describes in detail the different sources of Hillesum’s spirituality and the dynamics of her process. She shows how Hillesum’s faith in God became central in her life. Hillesum’s receptivity and non-judgmental attitude towards a large diversity of sources may give the writings of Hillesum an “eclectic outlook.” However, this textual outlook “should not be perceived in a pejorative sense but on the contrary as a universal and spiritual legacy accessible to all those—and there are many—who live on the fringe of all religious institutions nowadays.” In her final conclusions, the author stresses that Hillesum “never renounced her identity as a Jew.”

Pleshoyano emphasizes that Hillesum’s faith in God became central in her life, referring to several relevant passages. Hillesum’s texts, however, evoke different images of God. Which images? In his essay “Etty Hillesum and her God,” *Klaas A.D. Smelik* explores these different images of God in her writings. First, he offers some disciplinary remarks on textual approaches and criticizes ideological appropriations

of Hillesum's writings. According to Smelik, "there is a very great temptation to make statements about Hillesum's religious life while silently tiptoeing past the distinction between literature and reality. Still greater is the temptation to integrate Etty Hillesum in one's own religion or philosophy. This is very characteristic in the reception of her work." Etty Hillesum never became a Christian, as some readers assert, but stayed Jewish. She may be situated in "the group of Jews who had become assimilated before the Second World War." She herself did not want to be ideologically pigeonholed, but during the war she started writing about "we Jews." What about Hillesum's images of God? In Smelik's view, Hillesum's diary "changed from a therapeutic instrument into a conversation with God." In the last notebooks, there are many passages where Hillesum "speaks directly to God." Her use of the word 'God' seemed in the beginning more "an imaginary figure to whom she spoke because doing so made it easier for her to articulate her thoughts." However, a thorough spiritual process took place and the meaning of the word 'God' changed within the notebooks. Different images of immanence and transcendence alternated. "Besides the image of God dwelling within her, Etty Hillesum had another way of writing about God. In these passages, she envisioned a God reminiscent of what is written in the Bible about the God of Israel." Smelik recognizes some similarities with the biblical God (God as the creator of heaven and earth) but he also notices a vital difference with the common conception of God: Hillesum's God is not an almighty God. The most remarkable characteristic of Hillesum's God image is the notion that God "is not almighty, but that He can still call us to account for our deeds." In his final paragraph, Smelik explores Hillesum's faith in people. Hillesum's spiritual quest is "a turning inward that ends in commitment to other people." She believed in God and she believed in man.

Klaas Smelik recognizes a dialogical structure in Hillesum's God experience, but his own research does not focus on the dialogical structure of Hillesum's experience of the divine. In his essay "You-Consciousness?—Towards Political Theory: Etty Hillesum's Experience and Symbolization of the Divine Presence," *Meins G.S. Coetsier* examines the dialogical structure of Hillesum's experience of the divine presence. What started as an ordinary therapeutic diary, turned into a dialogue between the person Etty Hillesum and *the Other*. Coetsier calls Hillesum a mystic, because she is someone "who is intuitively aware of and attuned to a 'timeless Presence' or 'God,' in and beyond

the world of sensory experience of space and time, encountered and addressed as *You* or *Thou*.” In using the philosophical expression *You-consciousness* (developed by the author after having read Etty Hillesum, Eric Voegelin, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others), Coetsier refers to “the symbolization of our primary human experience and encounter with the divine.” Assisted by Eric Voegelin’s theory of consciousness as study of the divine, Coetsier analyzes Hillesum’s experience of *You-Consciousness*, concluding among other things that Hillesum’s experience of *You* is “not an internal or world immanent process only: it is an interpersonal activity of transcending that reaches out to God, to others in society and even beyond the life which ends in death.” According to Coetsier, Hillesum wanted to keep *You* alive among the human community. “What comes to be through *You-Consciousness* is the life of dialogue and this life connects the members of the human race.” *You-Consciousness* invites human beings to completely transform damaging systems and provides a basis for political theory. It may show human beings the way to “intelligible reordering of human existence and experience.” One of the powers of Etty Hillesum’s writings, says Coetsier, is that they represent a search for the Good.

Precisely this quality of Hillesum’s texts, mentioned by Meins Coetsier, intrigues *Brendan Purcell*. “To judge an action as objectively evil,” he argues, “we need a standard of goodness.” In his essay “Foundations for a Judgment of the Holocaust: Etty Hillesum’s Standard of Humanity,” Purcell suggests that Etty Hillesum arrived at that standard of goodness. He articulates the richness of Hillesum’s diaries and letters in three dimensions: the personal dimension, the social dimension and the historical dimension. On the personal level, Hillesum arrived (in cognitive openness) “at a level of moral conversion where we can see her reaching for the horizon of the good, in a language and experience which is even more concrete than Plato’s grounding vision of the Good.” Hillesum’s inner dialogues with God remind Purcell Kierkegaard’s articulation of the open self as “relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself the self is grounded transparently in the power which constituted it.” On the social level, Etty Hillesum—like Plato—is a representative of “the essential requirement of love at the heart of any human society, whether at the micro or macro level.” According to Purcell, Etty Hillesum’s insight into the core of human social existence reaches (more than Plato’s) beyond the merely personal and the merely political to embrace the entire human family. On

the historical level, Purcell (referring to Voegelin and Plato) comes to the conclusion that Hillesum arrived at a judgment on the persecution of her people by her intrinsic *you-relatedness*: “I love people so terribly, because in every human being I love something of You.” Hillesum refused to judge, says Purcell, but “by her living in the eternal now” she judged by affirming “the very reality which that racism attempted to deny and destroy.” Purcell reminds us that we must not forget Hillesum’s much-appreciated Dostoevskian key insight into hell: “The suffering of no longer being able to love.”

Not only Brendan Purcell refers to Dostoevsky. Many authors in this volume do so. Etty Hillesum not only had a Russian mother; she also studied the Russian language and had a deep interest in Russian literature. Hillesum’s spirituality was clearly inspired by Russian writers. In his essay “Etty Hillesum’s Russian Vocation and Spiritual Relationship to Dostoevsky,” *Wil van den Bercken* explains Hillesum’s particular interest in Russia. Her image of Russia—being the philosophical and spiritual opposite of the rational West—is formed by the books of Karl Nötzel and Walter Schubart. Among other things, Hillesum was intrigued by their descriptions of suffering. She copied passages conveying the Russian capacity for suffering: “The Russian bears his burden to the end [...] and suffers to his very depths. We stop halfway and relieve ourselves with words, reflections, philosophies, theoretical treatises [...]” Further, Hillesum’s drive was part of “a spiritual cosmopolitanism,” also inspired by Rilke’s *Stundenbuch*. One of her essential experiences, says Van den Bercken, was of her soul and intellect reflecting “all ages and all countries.” And: “Etty Hillesum retained this universal feeling everywhere, even while imprisoned behind barbed wire in camp Westerbork, sublimating it into inner strength.” Besides Rilke’s magic word *Weltinnenraum*, Hillesum’s used images of Russian vast landscapes to symbolize her “inner landscape.” In the second half of his essay, Van den Bercken studies Dostoevsky’s place in Etty Hillesum’s work, especially the spirituality of Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. The Dostoevskian spirituality, found in Hillesum’s texts, can be divided into three themes: first, the problem of human suffering in relationship to God; secondly, the experience of the creation as Paradise, in spite of evil; and thirdly, a common feeling of responsibility for the evil and an all-forgiving love towards everyone. Van den Bercken approaches these themes in detail and sees several surprising similarities between the Dostoevskian spirituality in *The Brothers Karamazov* and Hillesum’s spirituality. One of his conclusions

is that we “can read Etty Hillesum’s reflections as an echo of Dostoevsky.” He considers Dostoevsky—along with Rilke, Augustine and the Evangelists—one of the main sources of Hillesum’s spirituality.

Hillesum’s spirituality is obviously influenced by several Russian sources, but also—as is generally acknowledged—by sources of the Christian mystical traditions. “Can we speak of mysticism with regard to Etty Hillesum?” asks *Francesca Brezzi* in her essay “Etty Hillesum, an ‘Atypical’ Mystic.” Hillesum’s legacy is clearly influenced by mystical traditions, but “her work never reaches the depth of some great thinkers.” However, *Brezzi* recognizes in Hillesum’s work “a yearning for a new spirituality.” It is a mysticism that—in the words of the theologian Antonietta Potente—“is born in those societies experiencing events of cultural reforms or of discovering themselves.” This mysticism is not looking for “ecstatic experiences” but for “a meeting, a union with what life really reveals and demands of us.” *Brezzi* also cites Raimon Pannikar’s notion of mysticism as “an integral experience of life,” creating a new connection with reality. According to *Brezzi*, Hillesum’s words clearly reflect this form of mysticism. In analyzing Hillesum’s “existential journey,” *Brezzi* finds typical features of traditional mysticism, like simplicity and search for the essence, detachment and interiorization, inner freedom, finding God in the self, loving intimacy with God, love and responsibility for humanity. In this process, Hillesum’s words seems to echo—“but in a more fragmented and less systematic way”—those of great mystics like Meister Eckhart, Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross. *Brezzi* also recognizes “unconscious conceptual” links with contemporaries like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose conception of God was close to Hillesum’s notion of the non-omnipotent God who must be helped. Hillesum’s wish to be a host and a friend of God may be considered as “spiritual maternity.” This message of Hillesum’s legacy is highly relevant to the question posed by Adorno, Jonas and others: “Which God after Auschwitz?” According to *Brezzi*, Hillesum’s answer to this question is particularly meaningful. Hillesum does not conceptualize, but she “embodies a different way of thinking of God in which mysticism is grounded in the experience of unity, search and desire.”

Like *Francesca Brezzi*, but with a different emphasis, *Paul Lebeau* sees similarities between Etty Hillesum writings and texts of the Christian mystical tradition. In his essay “The Reception of Etty Hillesum’s Writings in the French Language,” the author focuses on the importance of Hillesum’s spiritual journey for contemporary theology and

society. He assures the reader that “Etty Hillesum has become, for the Francophone public, one of the most emblematic figures of a spirituality for our time.” In articulating Hillesum’s spiritual itinerary, Lebeau refers to insights and texts of Teilhard de Chardin, Merleau-Ponty, Ignatius de Loyola, Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Valéry and Paul Claudel. According to Lebeau, it is about time that theologians recognize the significance of Hillesum’s spirituality. The author emphasizes Hillesum’s sympathetic understanding of Christianity. Hillesum’s “spiritual experience—though her premature death prevented her from elaborating it thoroughly—was coupled with a conception of man and his relationship to God that had been passed on to her by ‘tradition,’ with Spier as her privileged mediator. Numerous references, explicit or implicit, which are found in her writings [...] allow us to qualify this tradition as ‘Judeo-Christian.’” This sympathy of Hillesum makes it “thus self-evident that numerous Christian readers from different backgrounds feel challenged and comforted in their belief, in their relation to God and men.” The fact that Etty Hillesum did not become a member of a religious society herself, Lebeau concludes, contributes to her large reception in contemporary pluralistic society.

Is it true, as Solange Leibovici stated in 2000, that the reception of Etty Hillesum is a “complicated story” and that Hillesum’s texts arrived from the beginning at “the wrong quarter,” meaning: “predominantly Catholics and former Catholics, followers of mystical movements or at least people seeking religious and ethical principles appropriate to present-day life?” By analyzing a number of publications from Dutch and Flemish authors of Catholic theological origin, *Ria van den Brandt* explains the complexity of this reception in the 1990’s. She wonders why Roman Catholic theologians of that period—even after the publication of the complete edition in 1986—still referred to the first unreliable edition and its unintended hagiographical introduction: “Most Dutch and Flemish theological authors, reading the introduction of *Het verstoorde leven*, accepted the alleged biographical facts, which fit well with the aura of a female mystic. And many of them stated—as if they had known Etty Hillesum personally—that ‘Etty’ (not: Etty Hillesum or Hillesum, but always: Etty) followed her “summons” for Camp Westerbork “without hesitation,” that she was a “shining personality” in Camp Westerbork and that she had consciously chosen—as a real martyr—her own death. She acted like a female sacrificing mystic: she went, completely selfless, full of God and divine love, her sacrificing way of compassion.” Because of this uncritical methodology,

“Hillesum’s historical and complicated biography was brought back to a manageable and simplified framework: she became a two-dimensional cliché.” This paradigm, says Van den Brandt, implicitly informed many theological discourses and hampered—for some time—a critical and scholarly reception of Etty Hillesum’s texts. In her essay “Etty Hillesum and her ‘Catholic Worshippers:’ Plea For a More Critical Approach to Etty Hillesum’s Writings,” Van den Brandt hopes for a more “critical, serious and scholarly reception within theology and other disciplines.” The worldwide interest in Hillesum’s spirituality is, she concludes, “not only to be attributed to Etty Hillesum’s *unfinished* or *open* image of God but also to the *finished* aspects of that image of God, through which many readers with different backgrounds can identify with her texts.”

Writing and Witnessing

In her essay “Etty Hillesum: A Portrait of a Holocaust Artist,” *Rachel Brenner* focuses on Hillesum’s evolution as an artist, “more specifically, [on] her evolution as a thinking writer, a writer with a well-examined, thoughtful message to the world.” She distinguishes two stages in Hillesum’s development as a thinking artist: the stage of preparation and the stage of the test. The stage of preparation included Hillesum’s growth in Amsterdam, preparing to face “through self-exploration as thinker and artist” the reality of the ultimate destruction. The stage of the test began with Hillesum’s first departure to transit camp Westerbork. There “Hillesum put to test both her ethical perspective and the art she had been striving to shape in defiance of the Nazi terror.” In the first phase, Hillesum gained insight that “her task as an artist was to bring about the victims’ fundamental change in their self-perception *as* they face destruction. She would like to ‘catch and stop their flight from themselves and then take them by the hand and lead them back to their own sources.’” According to Brenner, this intention represents the core of Hillesum’s ethical vision. This was what she taught herself to teach to her fellow-Jews. It is, Brenner writes, “a message of redemption in self-worth and self-dignity.” Only through exploration of our souls might we transform “our hatred for our fellow human beings for whatever race” into love. Love was “the only solution” to the terrible situation of the Second World War. In the second stage, the stage of the test, Etty Hillesum indeed seemed to live and write according her

principles of love and humanity. She seemed to be a “thinking heart,” a “thinking artist” until her deportation to Auschwitz: “As far as this book [the diaries and letters] allows us to follow Etty Hillesum on her way to Auschwitz, we are privileged to see her living up to the ultimate test of human values that she set up for herself.”

Like Rachel Brenner, *Debbie Pevenage* identifies Etty Hillesum as an artist, a “holocaust artist.” Those who deny Hillesum’s artistic qualities should read all her texts and take Hillesum’s development into account. In her essay “‘There was little of that harmonious rolling out of God’s hand:’ Struggle and Balance in the Diaries of Etty Hillesum,” Debbie Pevenage shows that Hillesum’s emotional development is closely related to her writing. The author examines the extent to which parallels can be drawn between her emotional development on the one hand and her writing on the other. She considers ‘struggle’ and ‘balance’ as central themes in this growth. Pevenage emphasizes that Hillesum’s diary functioned not only in a therapeutic way but also as “a ‘rough draft’ through which she attempts to discover the writer within and in doing so improve her writing style.” Hillesum regularly expressed her wish to be a concise writer, a chronicler. Pevenage considers Hillesum’s “move towards simplicity in being *and* writing” as “*the* main theme” in her diaries. She concludes that “the difference in style between the first exercise books and the final ones can be attributed to the fact that Hillesum is only able to write in clear language after she has settled things,” after “the development of a rudimentary mind in balance.” Unlike her early writing style, Hillesum’s later writing style is of “a distinctly higher level,” evoking “high literature.” Pevenage concludes, quoting Klaas A.D. Smelik that “the work has been bequeathed by a gifted writer who was murdered before she could publish.”

In her essay “Etty Hillesum: *écriture féminine*?” *Denise de Costa* is intrigued by Hillesum’s writing style. Like Pevenage, the author recognizes Hillesum’s growth in personality and writing and the “dual function” of the diary: “aside from its highly personal nature, it was also a ‘finger exercise in authorship.’” De Costa evaluates Hillesum’s texts by using Hélène Cixous’ notion of *écriture féminine*, referring to “the feminine libidinal economy” (which may be an economy of both men and women). De Costa explains how this feminine libidinal economy “is the affirmation and the source of life,” “leaves room for the other” and is characterized by “more tolerance.” The feminine libidinal economy is “not an economy of appropriation but of giving and the gift.” The feminine style of writing—*écriture féminine*—manifests itself in “the style

of water.” De Costa explains how this writing style is found in Hillesum’s work: “her writing was a continuation of how she was already living: in the realm of the feminine libidinal economy, where life’s joys and grief can coexist.” Hillesum’s work has affected De Costa in several ways. She admires how Hillesum—under difficult circumstances—wrote her diary and gave answers to great questions. She considers Hillesum’s spiritual resistance a “poetic politics” of “active passivity.” De Costa emphasizes not only the nourishing quality of Hillesum’s work, but also the “midwife” function of her texts: “Letting oneself be read by Etty Hillesum means re-establishing contact with the other and the alien both inside and outside oneself.”

Like De Costa, *Maria Gabriela Nocita*, recognizes the existential—“midwife”—power of Hillesum’s words: “I was enchanted by Hillesum’s path of existential communication.” Inspired by the paradigm within education that “what is human is communicated through what is human,” Nocita believes that Hillesum’s work “transcends space and time and reaches those who are ready to welcome it.” In her essay “Feeling Life: Etty Hillesum becomes Word,” she focuses on “two mysterious inner developments which gradually take shape in Hillesum: her ability to *feel life* and her ability to *communicate life*.” The process of feeling life started with Hillesum’s strong need to express herself, to find her own, liberating words. With Rainer Maria Rilke as her teacher, she learned that writing could be a way to get to know her inner world. It is through contact with her inner space—*Weltinnenraum*—that she was able to find “the spring of words.” In carefully scanning this inner world, Hillesum discovered “her great talent: her ability to feel life.” She refined this ability during her process of maturation. By experiencing the dynamics of her *Weltinnenraum*, she opened up her inner space for the other: “I experience people, and I also experience the suffering of people.” According to Nocita, in being able “to read life,” Etty Hillesum found “the meaning of her existence” and her calling to a vocation to help others. Hillesum arrived at an existential state of living authentically, in which her “words flow from a source so real that they can become life and life becomes word.” During her life, Hillesum became “a living mirror able to communicate existentially with the other.” It was Hillesum’s deepest wish to do something meaningful for future generations: to bear witness, to communicate life to “those who are ready to welcome it.”

In her diary notebooks and letters, Etty Hillesum increasingly expressed her wish to bear witness, to be a chronicler—a “small voice”—of her time, of her people. Her Westerbork letters are

considered a significant testimony on the history of this camp. *Bettine Siertsema*, *Gerrit Van Oord* and *Patricia Couto* focus on Hillesum as a chronicler. They focus on her Westerbork letters, comparing these with other witnesses. *Bettine Siertsema* compares Etty Hillesum's letters with Abel Herzberg's testimony, especially the way they write about their camp experience. In her essay "Etty Hillesum (1914–1943) and Abel Herzberg (1893–1989): Two Dutch Chroniclers of the Shoah," Siertsema—in comparing the two authors—criticizes Hillesum's so-called altruistic reputation: "Although they [Hillesum and Herzberg] have much in common, they differ substantially in their assessment of the people around them. Hillesum, in her criticism of fellow inmates, comes across as less saintly than her general reputation would lead one to assume, while Herzberg is milder in his judgment." The general image of Etty Hillesum, writes Siertsema, is "that of someone who is inspired by a great charity, a love for the whole community that made her choose camp Westerbork instead of the hiding place offered by her friends." Pointing out several passages of Hillesum's texts, Siertsema concludes that Hillesum is "unexpectedly harsh" and rather judgmental. In Camp Westerbork, Hillesum starkly condemns people's attitudes, especially when they are contrary to her own high standards of acceptance and inner strength. Herzberg's judgments are significantly milder. Siertsema suggests that this difference in judgment "is rooted in their different relationships with God and with Jewish tradition." Both authors have a personal relationship with God, but "Hillesum's is of a distinctly individual nature, whereas Herzberg primarily feels himself to be part of the Jewish community, worldwide and through ages." Moreover, Hillesum's eclecticism is strongly inspired by Christian sources and led her to "a very intimate, very personal relationship with God." Whereas 'doing good or justice' is at the centre of Herzberg's religion, 'love' is at the centre of Hillesum's spirituality. These different 'commitments' may explain the differences in the way they wrote about their camp experiences.

In his essay "Two Voices from Westerbork: Etty Hillesum and Philip Mechanicus on the Transport from Camp Westerbork on 24 August 1943," *Gerrit Van Oord* compares Etty Hillesum's and Philip Mechanicus' testimony on one specific Westerbork transport. His assessment of Hillesum seems to differ from Siertsema's evaluation. Van Oord's questions focus on the kind of information the authors intend to convey with their descriptions of the transport, the construction and topics of their texts and the motivation of their writing. After

giving detailed historical information about the authors and the genesis of their texts, he carefully analyzes both reports. His general conclusion is that both witnesses are indispensable for learning about the history of Camp Westerbork. Both reports are based on observations and discussions, but Hillesum's report "convey a generous capacity for feeling for and understanding others." Her report "makes their fears and despair almost palpable, and [...] brings the reader particularly close to the deportees." The report of Mechanicus "leaves little or no room for feelings of compassion." Mechanicus' report is more focused on "reporting the facts, alternating with reflections and comments," like the "spiritual degeneration" of the camp inmates. "For Mechanicus," Van Oord concludes, "observation demands that he maintain a respectable distance from the observed events." This was different for Hillesum.

Hillesum felt the "imperative to witness," says *Patricia Couto*, approaching her testimony from the historical perspective of the Jewish people and their God. In her essay "Witnesses and Victims of Massacre: The Literary Testimony of Samuel Usque and Ety Hillesum," Couto compares *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel* (1533) of the Portuguese Jewish writer and chronicler Samuel Usque with the letters of Ety Hillesum on Camp Westerbork. "Usque's chronicles included the tribulations suffered during the Middle Ages up until his own time and two letters of Hillesum chronicled the tribulations at Camp Westerbork." According to Couto, both authors were confronted with "the problem that traditional literary forms could not render the experience, both had to create an adequate framework for their testimony—a framework that would be true to the historical facts and to the transcendental dimension that upheld them." They both felt the imperative to witness the history of their people. "Like Usque, Hillesum considers her task of chronicler of Jewish suffering as sacred. Both were aware that in times of crisis and persecution many people tend to feel abandoned by God and then forsake Him. It's the chronicler's duty to remind his or her fellow creatures that the memory of past tribulations gives meaning to the suffering of the present. Only thus salvation can be gained. [...] While Usque's aim was to comfort and assure his fellow creatures that God would fulfil his promise of redemption if they would not abandon their faith, Hillesum's task was to comfort those who suffered and to save God in order to save the whole humanity."

Along with Couto and Van Oord, *Manja Pach* thinks highly of Hillesum's role as a chronicler. Yes, she plays a role in saving "the whole humanity." In her essay "Let's Talk about Hope! Etty Hillesum's Future-perspective—'We may suffer, but we must not succumb,'" Pach focuses on Hillesum's expectations. Hillesum hoped to play a role in post-war times and, says Pach, her decision to share the fate of her people was certainly "not inspired by resignation." She had a great love of life and her wish was to be a writer, to be a witness of her time. Nowadays, Hillesum's letters of Camp Westerbork are of vital importance for the post-war generations: "Reading Etty's letters helped me to get nearer to what happened to my father and mother, who both survived, and to my grandparents, my uncles and aunts, who all went through this transit camp and were murdered in Auschwitz and Sobibor." Pach demonstrates Hillesum's "strong will to live" by referring to passages in which Hillesum has visions of the post-war future. In these passages, Hillesum quite often uses the Dutch word *later* (the same in English: "later"): "later when I have survived it all." Pach is convinced that Hillesum kept "space for hope, for thoughts about 'later,' after the war."

Writing, witnessing, publishing. Testimonies need publishers to reach a broad public. In his essay "Context, Dilemmas and Misunderstandings during the Composition and Publication of *An Interrupted Life*, Etty Hillesum's Diary, 1941–1943," *Jan Geurt Gaarlandt* gives us insight into the textual genesis of the first selection of Hillesum's text in 1981: *Het verstoorde leven* ('An Interrupted Life'). Gaarlandt remembers how Klaas A.D. Smelik delivered "a small unattractive pile of papers to him, a text typed [by Johanna Smelik] with a defective typewriter." Gaarlandt started reading, was fascinated and asked Smelik to bring him all the available diary notebooks. These notebooks were "full of hieroglyphs" and seemed "an almost insurmountable barrier for a publisher who from day one had been told never to accept a handwritten manuscript." Gaarlandt found people who were prepared to decipher Hillesum's handwriting. Based on their transcriptions, he selected excerpts for publication. His goal was "to put the contents of Hillesum's most personal and cherished feelings into a consistent and compelling form." In doing this, he decided to leave out German sections, many repetitions, reports of telephone conversations, letters, book quotations, and passages about people who do not reappear in the diary, intimate notes about people who could be still alive, etc. Along with all these considerations and dilemmas concerning the choice of

selections, Gaarlandt also had to make a book that would be read by a large audience. It resulted in the publication of *Het verstoorde leven* ('An Interrupted Life'). After publication of this book, some writers accused Gaarlandt of being the source of Hillesum's hagiographic reception. Hans Bendien, for example, said that Gaarlandt had exaggerated Hillesum's martyrdom in his introduction. In addressing this critique, Gaarlandt discovered that "the typist had sometimes produced incomplete and shoddy excerpts from the exercise books, that she had left out sentences and, worse than that, had added things on several occasions 'in the spirit of Etty.'" But he also admits that some sentences in his introduction "may have contributed unintentionally to a portrait of Hillesum's saintly heroism." The frequently criticized sentence "When her call up comes, she leaves for Westerbork without any hesitation" may have misled many readers. This passage has been adjusted in the 2009 edition. Another criticism was the apparent absence of wartime episodes in the first edition. This criticism turned out to be incorrect: it was Hillesum herself who did not write much about the war. In his final paragraph, Gaarlandt writes about his special meeting with Christine van Nooten, the secret lover of Etty Hillesum's father. Etty Hillesum was the only person who knew of their relationship.

The "Thinking Heart"

Some interpreters like to think of Etty Hillesum as a philosopher. But what did Etty Hillesum herself think of philosophy? What was her attitude towards philosophy? Can we find 'philosophical practices' in her writings? These and other questions are posed by *Fulvio Manara* in his essay "Philosophy as a Way of Life in the Works of Etty Hillesum." In exploring these questions, Manara starts with a 'historic-critical' approach. He reminds the reader that Hillesum mentions and quotes "about twenty philosophers, from Abelard to Kierkegaard, from Augustine to Spinoza." During the war, she read her Dutch translation of Will Durant's book *The Mansions of Philosophy* (1929). According to Manara, Durant tries to elaborate a "coherent philosophy of life" refusing "a philosophy that has lost its significance for the direct experience of life in which every human being is merged." Durant prefers philosophy as (a search for) wisdom and Etty Hillesum's references to his book—such as "Knowledge is power, but only wisdom is liberty"—show that she was inspired by Durant's views. Furthermore,

Manara thinks that a 'lexicographical' approach (of the word 'philosophy' and its derivatives) may give further insight into Hillesum's view on philosophy. The word 'philosophy,' however, is not much used by Hillesum. She makes a notable number of negative and critical notations expressing "a rather elaborate criticism" of philosophy as theory or system. "Life cannot be forced into a system," and this observation by Hillesum seems to navigate her philosophical route. Theories and systems are sometimes needed, but should also be left behind. In order to get a more thorough insight into Hillesum's 'philosophy of life,' Manara concludes that this semantic field of (philosophy related) words should be enlarged in future research. Manara's third approach is the 'alchemic' approach: reading the text *par coeur*: "We have to greet the text as it is, to grant it, to listen to its living voice that speaks to us, and that questions us." Hillesum's texts, says Manara, are texts in which life experiences are 'mirrored.' In these experiences, we are confronted with her process of transformation, her way of living that can be considered as a philosophical practice, reminding us of ancient Greek practices. Hillesum's spiritual exercises (writing, dialoguing, and trying to attain a "cosmic conscience") constituted the very heart of her philosophy. Hillesum's writings, concludes Manara, tried "to embody a philosophical way of being." His reading *par coeur* brought him to the heart of Hillesum's philosophical being.

"In truth we are not ready yet for Etty Hillesum's lucid awareness," says *Maria Filomena Molder* in her essay "Why is Etty Hillesum a Great Thinker?" According to Molder, Etty Hillesum's greatest wish was to become "the thinking heart of the barracks." To understand Hillesum, it is crucial to understand her inner form of resistance: she did not want "to fall into the great process of self-victimization." Among other things, her receptivity to all the extreme and painful aspects of life, her inner knowledge of the "mighty whole" and her (non judgmental) power of observation are extraordinary. In Camp Westerbork, Hillesum wished to be a "photographic plate," registering everything of her surroundings. According to Molder, there are many moments "that she can no longer absorb what she is seeing, and no longer express herself." At these moments, the "demonic power of observing" is not powerful enough to overcome suffering and we can read her "cries of despair." Two weeks before her deportation, Hillesum's "descriptive capacity reaches its highest summit, the most suffering one, permitting us to see in its highest intensity what it means to be a 'thinking heart.'" According to Molder, Etty Hillesum is a great thinker, because we are

able “to seize [in her testimony] the foundation, the ethical principles and the critical conditions of genuine thought.” It is because of “these constitutive traits of her genuine thought” that we are not allowed “to pigeonhole Etty Hillesum in any particular history of philosophy.” Was she a philosopher, poet or prophet? She was certainly a “thinking heart.” We readers, concludes Molder, “are aware that our categories collapse every time we attempt to categorize what is implied in her writings.”

“Important personalities always risk being the object of projection,” says *Nadia Neri*, opposing all inclinations to label Etty Hillesum, especially the inclination to label Hillesum as a Christian thinker. According to Neri, Hillesum herself “showed human and cultural openness” and was inspired by many different sources. In her essay “Etty Hillesum’s Psychological and Spiritual Path: Towards an Ethics of Responsibility,” Neri focuses on the “closeness” of Hillesum’s psychological and spiritual development: “Etty Hillesum wanted to convey to us her joy when she discovered for herself the importance of a firm psychological foundation and later the joy of her conversion. These two paths,” says Neri, “are connected to one person, Julius Spier” and, among other readings, the works of Carl Gustav Jung. Neri emphasizes the *sine qua non* of Hillesum’s exceptional growth: *hineinhorchen* or ‘listening within.’ This daily introspection was not locked up in an egotistic individualism, but resulted in an exceptional spiritual conversion and an ethics of individual responsibility. Through introspection, says Neri, human beings are able to learn about their own psychological mechanisms, about their projections of hate on other individuals and groups. Etty Hillesum’s process—her message of individual responsibility and ‘helping God’—is commendable to those who want to be responsible in “such dark and dangerous times.”

Frits Grimmelikhuizen read Etty Hillesum’s *Twee brieven uit Westerbork* (‘Two Letters from Westerbork’) for the first time in 1959. These letters taught him a lot about the terrible history of the Jews during the war. In 1986, he was again confronted with Hillesum’s texts, this time with the complete edition of her available diaries and other letters in Dutch. Grimmelikhuizen started to read her texts and was surprised by Hillesum’s interest in Eastern philosophy, especially in Buddhism. Since then, he has treasured Etty Hillesum “as a friend, and even more, as a fellow artist, a fellow bohemian, a fellow seeker in working, living and loving.” In his essay “The Road of Etty Hillesum to Nothingness,” Grimmelikhuizen tries to show that there is “a significant correlation

between Hillesum's life and writings and Eastern philosophy." According to the author, Hillesum had "a creative form of 'Buddhism.'" She not only used the term 'Buddha' or 'Buddhist' to refer to her daily exercises of introspection; her whole way of thinking and writing bore "a close resemblance" to the 'Buddhist way.' This might have been influenced by Julius Spier, Rainer Maria Rilke, Carl Gustav Jung and others. "Although," Grimmelikhuizen says, "it's doubtful whether Etty Hillesum knew *The Four Noble Truths* [of Siddhartha Gautama], it is amazing how many of these experiences actually apply to her spiritual journey." The author explores Hillesum's 'Buddhist way' of life—not forgetting her Jewish origins—by focusing on subjects such as enlightenment, the inner God, *tikkun olam*, suffering, *Weltinnenraum*, attentiveness, detachment, emptiness and simple being. Why does Grimmelikhuizen mention *tikkun olam*? Because in "authentic Judaism, as well as in authentic Buddhism, it is imperative to change the world beginning with yourself. We see that in the Jewish tradition this act of change is called *tikkun olam* ("repairing the world")—this is one of the foremost Jewish 'religious commands' (*mitzvoth*). An equivalent principle is found in Buddhism, where a very important act for each Buddhist is to act and to pray in such a way that every being on earth may gain happiness, no matter where they are or who they are—everybody." And this principle was also Etty Hillesum's imperative: to make a better world, starting with yourself. It was the truth of the 'thinking heart' of the Westerbork barracks, who died in Auschwitz-Birkenau on 30 November 1943. It was the truth of a Jewish woman, murdered by the nazi's, who was convinced that humanity and human dignity can survive in a barbaric world, the hatred around her notwithstanding.

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF ETTY HILLESUM (1914–1943)

Klaas A.D. Smelik

(Etty Hillesum Onderzoekscentrum, Ghent University)

Esther (Etty) Hillesum was born on 15 January 1914 in her parents' home at Molenwater 77 in Middelburg, the capital of Zeeland, where her father Levie (Louis) Hillesum had been teaching classical languages (Greek and Latin) since 1911. In Amsterdam, on 7 December 1912, he had married Etty's mother, Riva (Rebecca) Bernstein, who went with him to Middelburg. Etty's father was born in Amsterdam on 25 May 1880, the youngest of four children, to the merchant Jacob Samuel Hillesum and his wife Esther Hillesum-Loeza; Etty, therefore, was named after her paternal grandmother. The family lived at the time at Sint Antoniesbreestraat 31, Amsterdam.

Louis Hillesum studied classical languages at the University of Amsterdam. In 1902, he took his bachelor's, followed in 1905 by his master's (both degrees *cum laude*). On 10 July 1908, he defended his thesis *De imperfecti et aoristi usu Thucydidis* (also awarded *cum laude*). Middelburg was his first teaching assignment. In 1914, he began teaching classical languages at the Hilversum Gymnasium (grammar school), but, due to deafness in one ear and impaired vision, had trouble maintaining order in the large classes at that institution. That is why, in 1916, he moved to the smaller Gymnasium in the town of Tiel in the middle of the Netherlands. In 1918, he became teacher of classics and deputy headmaster in Winschoten in the North-Eastern part of the Netherlands. In 1924, he was appointed to similar positions at the Gymnasium in Deventer, where he became headmaster (Dutch: 'rector') on 1 February 1928. He remained there until his forced dismissal on 29 November 1940, at the request of the German occupier.

Louis Hillesum has been described as a small, quiet and unobtrusive man, a stoic, scholarly recluse with a great deal of humour and erudition. In the lower forms, he had at first experienced serious difficulties maintaining order and in response became an extremely strict teacher. In the higher forms, however, he came into his own. Although interested in Judaism, Louis Hillesum was highly assimilated; he worked, for example, on Saturdays. In Deventer, he was among the city's

leading citizens, and even in Camp Westerbork he maintained these contacts and his cultural interests.

His wife Riva was born to Michael Bernstein and Hinde Lipowsky on 23 June 1881 in Pochev (Russia). Following a pogrom, she was the first person in her family to leave Surazh (Chernigol) and come to Amsterdam on 18 February 1907. She moved in with the Montagnu family, at number 21 on the Tweede Jan Steenstraat. Her profession at that time was recorded as Russian-language teacher. On 29 May of that same year, her younger brother Jacob, a diamond cutter, followed, and moved in with the Montagnu family as well. On 10 June 1907, her parents arrived in Amsterdam from Surazh. They moved into the second floor of the house on the Tweede Jan Steenstraat. On 9 January 1913, Jacob married Marie Mirkin, who had come from Warsaw to Amsterdam on 5 May 1913. Their daughter Rahel Sarra was born on 19 October of that year. Shortly afterwards, the entire family emigrated illegally to the United States; only Riva remained behind with Louis Hillesum, to whom she had been married on 7 December 1912.

Riva Hillesum-Bernstein has been characterized as lively, chaotic, extroverted and dominant. Etty's relationship with her mother was a difficult one in the early years, but apparently improved while they were at Camp Westerbork. In addition to Etty, Riva Hillesum bore two more children: Jacob (Jaap), born in Hilversum on 27 January 1916 and named after Louis' father, and Michael (Mischa), named after Riva's father.

Jaap Hillesum completed the Gymnasium in 1933. He went on to study medicine, first at the University of Amsterdam and later at Leiden University. He was intelligent, wrote poems and was attractive to women. Mentally, he was unstable: he was committed to psychiatric hospitals on several occasions. During the war, he worked as an intern at the *Nederlandsch-Israelietisch Ziekenhuis* (Jewish hospital) in Amsterdam.

Mischa Hillesum was born on 22 September 1920 at Winschoten. Even as a child, he exhibited striking musical talent. In 1931, he moved to Amsterdam, where he attended the famous Vossius Gymnasium for three years and spent the rest of his time studying piano. His mentor was the famous Dutch pianist George van Renesse (1909–1994). Around 1939, he was committed to *Het Apeldoornsche Bos* (at that time the Jewish mental asylum in the Netherlands) and treated for schizophrenia. Even after his release, he continued to be extremely unstable.

Mischa was not only an accomplished pianist, he also composed music (his compositions have been preserved).

Etty spent her childhood years in Middelburg, Hilversum (1914–1916), Tiel (1916–1918), Winschoten (1918–1924) and Deventer, from July 1924 on, where she entered the fifth form of the Graaf van Burenschool. The family lived at number 51 on the A.J. Duymaer van Twiststraat (currently number 2). Later (in 1933) they moved to the Geert Grootestraat 9, but by then, Etty was no longer living at home.

After primary school, Etty attended the Gymnasium in Deventer, where her father was deputy headmaster. Unlike her younger brother Jaap, who was an extremely gifted pupil, Etty's marks were not particularly high. At school, she also studied Hebrew, and for a time she attended the meetings of a Zionist young people's group in Deventer.

After completing her school years, she went to Amsterdam to study law. She took lodgings with the Horowitz family, at the Ruysdaelstraat 32¹, where her brother Mischa had been staying since July of 1931. Six months later, she moved to the Apollolaan 29, where her brother Jaap had been living since September 1933 while he was studying medicine. In November 1933, Jaap moved to the Jan Willem Brouwerstraat 22^{house}; Etty followed one month later. In September 1934, Etty's name once again appeared in the registry at Deventer. On 6 June 1935, she took her bachelor's exams at the University of Amsterdam. At that time, she was living with her brother Jaap at Keizersgracht 612^c.

In March of 1937, she took a room in the house of the accountant Hendrik (Han) J. Wegerif, at Gabriel Metsustraat 6¹, an address also officially registered as the residence of her brother Jaap from October 1936 to September 1937. Wegerif, a widower, asked Etty Hillesum to take care of the household, but they also began an affair. It was in this house so dear to her that Etty Hillesum lived until her definitive departure for Camp Westerbork in June 1943.

Not much is known about Etty Hillesum's university years. She travelled in left-wing, antifascist student circles, and was politically and socially aware without belonging to a political party. After the publication of her diaries, her acquaintances from this period were amazed to learn of Etty Hillesum's spiritual development during the war years, a period in which she adopted clearly different interests and a different circle of friends, although she did maintain a number of her pre-war contacts. Etty Hillesum took her master's exams in Dutch Law (public

law in particular) on 23 June and 4 July of 1939. Her academic results were not striking.

In addition, she studied Slavic languages at Amsterdam and Leiden, but the German occupation prevented her from completing this study with an exam. She did, however, continue to study Russian language and literature until the very end, and also gave lessons in these subjects. She taught a course at the *Volksuniversiteit* ('Open University') and later gave private lessons until her definitive departure to Camp Westerbork. When she was deported to Poland, she had in her rucksack a bible and a Russian grammar.

The diaries were written largely in her room on the Gabriel Metsustraat, where not only she and Wegerif, but also Wegerif's son, Hans, the German housekeeper Käthe Fransen and a chemistry student by the name of Bernard Meylink were living. It was through Bernard that, on Monday, 3 February 1941, ETTY went to serve as 'model' for the psycho-chirologist Julius Spier, at the Courbetstraat 27 in Amsterdam.

Spier (who is almost always referred to in the diaries as 'S.') was born in Frankfurt am Main in 1887, the sixth of seven children. At the age of fourteen, he was apprenticed to the Beer Sontheimer trading firm. There he succeeded in working his way up to a managerial position. His original ambition of becoming a singer was foiled by an illness that left him hard of hearing.

Spier enjoyed moving in artistic circles and set up his own publishing house, by the name of *Iris*. In addition, from 1904 on, he had a pronounced interest in chiromology. Following his 25th jubilee at Beer Sontheimer in 1926, Spier withdrew from business life to dedicate himself to the study of chiromology. He underwent instructive analysis with C.G. Jung in Zurich, and at Jung's recommendation opened a practice in 1929 as psycho-chirologist on the Aschaffenburgstrasse in Berlin. The practice there was rather successful. Spier also taught courses.

In 1934, he divorced his wife, Hedl (Hedwig) Rocco, to whom he had been married since 1917, and left the two children, Ruth and Wolfgang, with her. He had a number of affairs, but finally became engaged to his pupil, Hertha Levi, who emigrated to London in 1937 or 1938. Spier also left Nazi Germany, and came as a legal immigrant to Amsterdam in early 1939. After first living with his sister on the Muzenplein, and later in a room on the Scheldestraat, from late 1940 on, he rented two rooms from the Nethe family at the Courbetstraat

27 in Amsterdam-South. There he also set up practice and taught courses. The students at those courses and their friends invited ‘models’ whose hands Spier analyzed by way of practical example.

Gera Bongers, the sister of Bernard Meylink’s fiancée Loes, was one of Spier’s students, and it was through Bernard Meylink that Etty Hillesum was invited to have her hands analyzed during a Monday evening class. This fairly chance encounter proved formative for the course of Etty Hillesum’s life. She was immediately impressed by Spier’s personality, and decided to go into therapy with him. On 8 March 1941, she drafted a letter to Spier in an exercise book.

The next day, she began on her diary, probably at Spier’s advice and as part of her therapy. Little wonder, then, that the relationship with Spier was a major theme in her diaries. For Etty Hillesum, however, keeping a diary was useful for more than therapy alone; it also fit well with her literary ambitions. She wanted to become a writer and her diaries could later provide material for a novel, for example. In this context, it is worth noting that some of her letters contain quotes from her diary. Moreover, she hoped in this way to find a way of describing her thoughts and feelings in a literary manner. That proved not to be easy but gradually she developed her own style of writing and gained confidence in her abilities.

Although his patient, Hillesum also became Spier’s secretary and friend. Because Spier wished to remain faithful to Hertha Levi, and because Etty Hillesum already had a relationship with Han Wegerif, a certain distance was always present in the relationship between Hillesum and Spier, despite its importance to both. Spier had a very great influence on Etty Hillesum’s spiritual development; he taught her how to deal with her depressive and egocentric bent, and introduced her to the Bible and St. Augustine. Etty Hillesum had been reading other authors, such as Rilke and Dostoevsky, since her schooldays, but under Spier’s influence their work also took on deeper meaning for her.

Over the course of time, the relationship with Spier assumed a less central position in Etty Hillesum’s life. When he died on 15 September 1942, she had developed enough to be able to assimilate his death with a certain ease—particularly because she realized the fate that would otherwise have awaited him as a Jew.

In the diaries, one can clearly see how the anti-Jewish measures increasingly impacted Etty Hillesum’s life, even though she had resolved to follow the line of her own spiritual development no matter what. When she was expecting a summons to report to Camp Westerbork,

she applied—at the recommendation of her brother Jaap—for a position with the *Joodsche Raad* (‘Jewish Council’). Through patronage, she received an appointment to the office on Lijnbaansgracht (later Oude Schans) in Amsterdam on 15 July 1942. She performed her administrative duties for the Jewish Council with reluctance, and had a negative opinion of the Council’s general role. However, she found useful the work she was to do later for the department of ‘Social Welfare for People in Transit’ at Camp Westerbork, where to she was transferred at her own request on 30 July 1942.

There it was that she met Joseph (Jopie) I. Vleeschhouwer and M. Osias Kormann, the two men who would go on to play a major role in her life. Her first stay at Camp Westerbork did not last long; on 14 August 1942, she was back in Amsterdam. From there, she left on 19 August 1942 to visit her parents for the last time in Deventer. Somewhere around 21 August, she returned to Camp Westerbork. Early September 1942, she is back in Amsterdam again. On 20 November 1942, she came back to Camp Westerbork, but illness forced her to go home on 5 December 1942. It was not until 5 June 1943 that she had recovered sufficiently to be *allowed* to return to Camp Westerbork. For, unlike what one might expect, she was very keen to get back to the camp and resume her work, to provide a bit of support for the people as they were preparing themselves for transport. It was for this reason that Etty Hillesum consistently turned down offers to go into hiding. She said that she wished to “share her people’s fate.”

Hillesum’s departure from Amsterdam on 6 June 1943 turned out to be definitive, for on 5 July 1943 the special status granted to personnel at the Camp Westerbork section of the Jewish Council came to an end. Half of the personnel had to return to Amsterdam, while the other half became camp internees. Etty Hillesum joined the latter group: she wished to remain with her father, mother and brother Mischa, who had meanwhile been brought to Camp Westerbork.

Etty Hillesum’s parents had moved on 7 January 1943 from Deventer to the Retiefstraat 11^{hs} in Amsterdam, after having first attempted to use doctor’s orders to circumvent their forced removal. During the great raid of 20 and 21 June 1943, they were picked up—along with Mischa, who had come to live with them—and they were transported to Camp Westerbork. At the time this occurred, efforts were already being made to obtain special dispensation for Mischa Hillesum on the grounds of his musical talent. The sisters Milli Ortmann and Grete Wendelgest in particular were behind these efforts. Both the famous

conductor Willem Mengelberg and the director of the Amsterdam Conservatory Willem Andriessen wrote letters of recommendation for Mischa Hillesum, which have been preserved. These attempts proved fruitless, due to Mischa Hillesum's insistence that his parents accompany him to Camp Barneveld where some seven hundred prominent Dutch Jews were interned. This was not allowed; Mischa Hillesum did, however, receive a number of special privileges during his stay at Camp Westerbork.

When his mother Riva Hillesum wrote a letter to the *Höhere SS-und Polizeiführer* Hanns Albin Rauter in which she asked for a few privileges as well, Rauter was enraged and, on 6 September 1943, ordered the entire family to be immediately sent on transport. The German commander at Camp Westerbork, *SS-Obersturmführer* Albert Konrad Gemmeker interpreted this order to include Ety Hillesum, despite the attempts by her contacts in the camp to protect her from this. His superior Rauter had ordered the Hillesum family to be put on transport and Ety was part of this family—that was his simple reasoning. On 7 September 1943, Louis, Riva, Ety and Mischa Hillesum left Camp Westerbork on their way to Poland.

Only Jaap Hillesum did not go with them; at the time, he was still in Amsterdam. He arrived in Camp Westerbork in late September of 1943. In February 1944, he was deported to Bergen-Belsen. When that camp was partially evacuated, he was placed on a train with other prisoners. After a journey full of deprivation and hardship, the train was finally liberated by Russian soldiers in April 1945. Like so many others, however, Jaap Hillesum did not survive the journey.

Ety's father and mother either died during transport to Auschwitz or were gassed immediately upon arrival. The date of death given was 10 September 1943. According to the Red Cross, Ety died at Auschwitz-Birkenau on 30 November 1943. Her brother Mischa died on 31 March 1944, also at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Before her final departure to Camp Westerbork, Ety Hillesum gave her Amsterdam diaries to Maria Tuinzing, who had meanwhile come to live in the house on the Gabriel Metsustraat as well. Ety Hillesum asked her to pass them along to the writer Klaas Smelik, with the request to publish them if she did not return. In 1946 or 1947, Maria Tuinzing turned over the exercise books and a bundle of letters to Klaas Smelik. His daughter Johanna (Jopie) Smelik then typed out sections of the diaries, but Klaas Smelik's attempts to have the diaries published in the 1950s and early 1960s proved fruitless.

But two letters Etty Hillesum had written, in December 1942 and on 24 August 1943, concerning conditions in Camp Westerbork, did get published. They appeared in the autumn of 1943 in an illegal edition by David Koning, at the recommendation of Etty Hillesum's friend Petra (Pim) Eldering. This edition, with a run of one hundred copies, was printed by B.H. Nooy of Purmerend under the title *Drie brieven van den kunstschilder Johannes Baptiste van der Pluym (1843–1912)* [‘Three Letters from the Painter Johannes Baptiste van der Pluym (1843–1912)’]. The two letters were preceded by a foreword with a biography of the artist, and followed by a third letter, both written by David Koning to camouflage the true contents. The revenues from the publication were used to provide assistance to Jews in hiding. These letters have since been republished on several occasions.

In the autumn of 1979, I approached the Dutch publisher Jan Geurt Gaarlandt with a request to publish Etty Hillesum's diaries given to me by my father, Klaas Smelik. This resulted in 1981 in the publication of *Het verstoorde leven* (‘An Interrupted Life’), and in 1986 in the publication of all Etty Hillesum's known writings in Dutch. Since then, an English and a French translation of the complete Dutch edition have appeared. All these editions and the many translations of parts of her writings are—in Horace's words—a *monumentum aere perennius* (‘a monument more lasting than bronze’) to this woman who, along with so many others, fell victim to the greatest crime of the 20th century.

PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE IN THE WORKS OF ETTY HILLESUM

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In this paper, I will explore some issues that arise from the study of the diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum, from the perspective of philosophy and philosophical practice. Although we have begun this exploration in recent years, the argument that I will present here is far from conclusive. I will offer a panoramic yet summarized account of a process of investigation that is still in progress.

1. *A Philosophical Requirement*

In current studies of Etty Hillesum, there are two contrasting schools of thought as to whether ‘Etty Hillesum was a philosopher.’ Some interpreters accept this statement, others deny it, and all with a varying degree of decisiveness or certainty. It may be that the answer depends on what the interpreter thinks about philosophy and philosophizing. However, in my opinion, it is also intriguing to explore what Hillesum herself thought about philosophy, and to see if any evidence of her possible ‘philosophical practices’ can be found in her writing. I will try to address that issue in this article.

To illustrate the complexity of such an inquiry, I refer to the well-known metaphor described by Walter Benjamin in the first pages of his famous essay on Goethe’s *Wahlverwandschaften* (‘Elective Affinities’). Benjamin suggests an interesting distinction between the interests of philology and those of critique, and at the same time an inevitable and difficult connection between the two. He offers a vivid metaphor: Let us imagine a work of art, or a philosophical work, or your life, “as burning funeral pyre.” The philologist or commentator’s task is compared to that of the chemist, whose objects of analysis are simply “wood and ashes.” The critic, on the other hand, is compared to an

alchemist, for whom “only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive.”¹

According to this metaphor, and applying it to the work of Etty Hillesum, we immediately recognize in the ‘wood’ and ‘ashes’ every source and document left to us. The history of her texts offers us a well-defined *corpus* which has been rescued from oblivion and given back to humanity. We also recognize the strong vitality and powerful and generative force of the ‘living flame,’ or *truth content* in the work of Etty Hillesum. Of course, the editorial success and significance of her work for an international readership are not enough to guarantee a deep understanding of it nor are the charged responses to the publications of her writing, which are also important. The overwhelming power of her writing may elicit injudicious reactions in a pretext of comprehension that ignores the interest in philosophical questions.

In any case, personal conviction is simply not enough in assessing whether Hillesum was philosophical, and to what extent. There is no substitute for working with attention and precision on the material and true content of her legacy. The value of an interpretation, as Benjamin teaches, depends on the capacity to feel, understand and show the *true content* of a work and an experience. When these aspects are separated, over the course of time, from the *material content* of the work itself, the true content is likely to remain hidden.

On the other hand, our own way of understanding philosophy and philosophising may be questioned. In fact, that may have been a valid, yet subconscious issue for Hillesum herself.

The object of the investigation and the investigator are both to be examined. We must try to take into account philological and lexicographical research, and concurrently explore possibilities in terms of living and feeling the philosophical experience. We need, along with the work of the chemist/commentator, the alchemic experience of the critic who tries to catch the living flame and see its truth.

Another perspective deserving of consideration is the sociological aspect. Hillesum definitely did not belong to the world of the ‘profes-

¹ Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften*, in: Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften: Band 1,1*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt/M.: Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 1991), 123–201; E.T.: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 1 1913–1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock & Michael W. Jennings (London: The Belkna Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 297–298.

sionals' of philosophy, to the world of the 'professionals of the spirit,' as defined by Todorov.

Generally, we apply the label of 'philosopher' only to those who have risen to the 'pantheon' of the few writers who have created new visions of the world. That is clearly quite different from the way most disciplines—from geology to theology, biology to sociology—function. At least in my country, we do not usually use the word 'philosopher' to describe those who present simple philosophical teachings. Often it is said that, with respect to a 'teacher of philosophy,' being a philosopher is something else. Less and less we say that a 'philosopher' is someone who is simply enthusiastic about philosophy, who cultivates it as a personal interest or experiences it in her life (as is the case with Hillesum). In the West, throughout our history, we have identified only several hundred 'philosophers,' who are or were recognized and revered as such.

Nevertheless, beyond this select number of 'philosophers,' we know that currently, and in the past, there are and have been countless individuals associated with philosophy, many more than those known as the 'great philosophers.' As with other texts from the last century, the works of Etty Hillesum offer evidence that along with the small group of 'official' philosophers recognized in history as thinkers who created new visions of the world, there are many individuals for whom philosophy was alive and vital in their lives, significant in terms of their own life experiences. However, when we talk of philosophy, it is still common not to recognize the significance of this ordinary, *banal* experience of philosophical practice.

Etty Hillesum did not systematically study philosophy. She did not conduct any specific philosophical studies. However, despite this, we may consider her witnessing of a different and more common world as having greater significance than some renowned thinkers.

In the works of Etty Hillesum we find a way of practising philosophy quite different from others more well-known and recognized in the western world. On one hand, she seems clearly aware of her philosophical attitudes. On the other, she does not appear to be fully conscious of her philosophical practise.

Today, we can try to understand and read her works more carefully in light of some recent studies and reflections on the issue of philosophical practices. This approach is important not only to studies of Hillesum and her way of thinking, but also to us and the way we live the philosophical experience, in each individual's life, in its own way.

2. *The Chemist's Approach*

First of all, I will note some historiographical and philological aspects of this investigation. That is to say, following Benjamin's aforementioned metaphor, I will rely on the chemist's approach, the one of the person who analyzes his materials. The works of Etty Hillesum are the object of such an analysis, providing evidence in the form of information. It is important to avail ourselves of this approach—and nowadays it is essential if we want to avoid hasty and superficial reactions, or possibly hagiographic ones. Through Hillesum's texts, we can move in at least two different directions, through historical-critical investigation, and by means of lexicographical analysis.

2.1. *A Historical-Critical Inquiry*

We should ask ourselves, firstly, who were the philosophers Hillesum studied in her course curriculum. We should also examine the 'philosophical' sources and the philosophers she noted and referred to in her exercise books.

On various occasions in her notebooks and letters, Hillesum mentions about twenty philosophers, including Abelard, Kierkegaard, Augustine and Spinoza. Obviously, she did not read all these writers with the same level of care and attention. We know that in reading the great philosophers, she did have some marked preferences, for example, for Augustine, and definitely for Jung. We know that at Camp Westerbork she brought with her some texts by Meister Eckhart, in which she sometimes sought refuge. But we also know that in her diaries it is very difficult to find a passage in which she quotes or explicitly embraces a thesis or a simple consideration from any philosopher.

Hillesum also habitually read and studied other writers, such as Rilke, Dostoevsky, and others who represent a significant philosophical source, even if it is indirect.

While recognizing these lines of inquiry, I do not want, in this paper, to procrastinate on analyses which are historical, critical and topical. I want to consider what is without doubt a secondary though highly relevant philosophical source for Hillesum, as far as her readings and her studies are concerned: Will Durant, author of the book *The Mansions of Philosophy*, published in New York in 1929.²

² Will Durant, *The Mansions of Philosophy* (New York: Garden City Pub. Co. & Simon and Schuster, 1929).

William James Durant (1885–1981) was an American progressive intellectual and an enormously successful writer during the period between the two World-wars.³ In those years, he devoted himself to ‘liberating’ philosophy from its closed academic cloisters. He chose to philosophize about the problems of his time, starting with the social ones, in order to help people explore philosophy directly, and practice it, to make them capable of understanding its significance for their personal life experiences.

In *The Mansions of Philosophy*, Durant tries to elaborate a coherent ‘philosophy of life.’⁴ In his books on philosophy, he rejects the scholastic presentation of philosophy which vanishes in a void of concepts and arguments. He denounces a philosophy that has lost its capacity to help people comprehend their problems in terms of meaning and a sense of human life. Durant denies that philosophy has no meaning for direct life experiences. He advocates for philosophy as a matter of wisdom.

The Dutch translation of *The Mansions of Philosophy* appeared in 1940.⁵ We know from the annotations in the critical edition of her works that Hillesum owned a copy of the second edition of the book written by Durant, also published in 1940. On the flyleaf of her copy, she wrote her name and the date “May 1941.” We take this as the date she came into possession of this book. It is quite likely she started her reading in a copy lent by someone. In any case, it is clear that she was very attracted to this book, since she copied some quotations in her exercise book on 15 March 1941:⁶

No one (except Spengler) dares today to survey life in its entirety; analysis leaps and synthesis lags; we fear the experts in every field, and keep ourselves, for safety’s sake, lashed to our narrow specialties. Everyone knows his part, but is ignorant of its meaning in the play. Life itself grows meaningless, and becomes empty just when it seemed most full.⁷

³ A precedent book of him, *The Story of Philosophy*, did sold more than 2 millions copies: this success did made him able to retire from teaching and devote himself to the mission of high social popularisation. He became one of the most important and popular educators of the 20th century.

⁴ Durant, *The Mansions of Philosophy*, vii.

⁵ Will Durant, *In den hof der Wijsbegeerte* (The Hague: L.J.C. Boucher, 1940).

⁶ In the English translation of the writings of Ety Hillesum the translator did translate Durant’s quotations made by Ety from the Dutch to English, instead of making appeal to the English original. Here I take the English quotations from the original.

⁷ Durant, *The Mansions of Philosophy*, viii; *Ety*, 23–24: Niemand (Spengler uitgezonderd) durft tegenwoordig het leven in zijn geheel te beschouwen; de analyse snelt voort en de synthese talmt; we vrezen de vakkundigen op ieder terrein, en blijven, om der wille van onze veiligheid, vastzitten aan de enge grenzen van ons eigen vakgebied.

We shall define philosophy as total perspective, as mind overspreading life and forging chaos into unity.⁸

Knowledge is power, but only wisdom is liberty.

Our culture is superficial today, and our knowledge dangerous, because we are rich in mechanisms and poor in purposes. The balance of mind which once came of a warm religious faith is gone; science has taken from us the supernatural bases of our morality, and the entire world seems consumed in a disorderly individualism that reflects the chaotic fragmentation of our character.⁹

With these quotations, Hillesum illustrates how attentive she was in reading Durant's *Invitation*. A little before the passage in which he offers a clear distinction between knowledge and wisdom, Durant wrote that philosophy is "harmonized knowledge making a harmonious life. It is the self-discipline which lifts us to serenity and freedom." And he concluded his *Invitation* with the words: "we shall not be saved without wisdom."¹⁰ It is clear that this quest for harmony was also Hillesum's specific aspiration in her journey with Spier, and also in the practice of philosophy. Durant's philosophical answer sought to cure the chaotic fragmentation of our personality: this knowledgeable approach must have nurtured Hillesum's enthusiasm.

During that same month of March, she undoubtedly continued with her reading, since on two occasions (17 and 24 March) she wrote that she really appreciated "Durant's wonderful book,"¹¹ and that when she read it, it was like "spoiling herself." She also adds that she amused herself with this book to the point that finally she preferred Durant's writing to the study of Old Bulgarian:

Ieder kent zijn deel, maar kent de betekenis daarvan in het gehele spel niet. Het leven zelf groeit zonder betekenis verder en wordt leeg, juist nu het zo vol mogelijk scheen.—

⁸ Durant, *The Mansions of Philosophy*, ix; *Etty*, 24: We zullen de wijsbegeerte definiëren als de blik op het geheel, als de geest, die zich over het leven spreidt en de chaos tot eenheid smeedt.

⁹ Durant, *The Mansions of Philosophy*, x–xi; *Etty*, 24: Kennis is macht, maar alleen wijsheid is vrijheid. De cultuur in onze dagen is oppervlakkig en onze kennis gevaarlijk, omdat we rijk aan mechanismen en arm aan doelstellingen zijn. Het evenwicht van de geest, dat eens voortkwam uit een warm godsdienstig geloof, is verdwenen; de wetenschap heeft de bovennatuurlijke grondslagen van onze zedeleer weggenomen en de gehele wereld schijnt verteerd in een onordelijk individualisme, dat de chaotische verbroekeling van ons karakter weerkaatst.

¹⁰ Durant, *The Mansions of Philosophy*, x.

¹¹ E.T., 27: Then in the evening, I really enjoyed Durant's wonderful book. [*Etty*, 29: En toen 's avonds werkelijk genoten van dat verrukkelijke werk van Durant.]

Now I shall go and spoil myself with a little Durant, though I should really be doing some Old Bulgarian, but I am enjoying myself too much for that right now. Today all I did was work on myself, but tomorrow I simply must get down to the real job again, otherwise nothing I do will make sense. Never say die, my girl!¹²

And we must note not only the interesting connection between the expressions “spoil myself with a little Durant” and “enjoying myself,” but also with “work on myself.”¹³

Anyway, after having obtained her personal copy of Durant’s book, Hillesum, at a certain moment—to be specific, on 8 June 1941—tells us that she decided to read a few small passages of *The Mansions of Philosophy* each morning, as an alternative to the reading of the Bible, with which, she says, she was not yet at ease with:

I might of course read the Bible each morning, but I don’t think I’m ready for that, I still worry about the real meaning of the book, rather than lose myself in it. I think I’ll read a little bit of *In den Hof der Wijsbegeerte* (‘The Mansion of Philosophy’) each morning instead.¹⁴

Finally, we know that she kept her copy of *In den Hof* for two years, until she made a gift of it to Milli Ortmann, to thank her for having helped her with her parents and brother Mischa. This took place on 4 June 1943, two days before her definitive departure to Camp Westerbork.¹⁵

In any case, it seems that Etty Hillesum was quite attached to this book. Whether she decided or not to make Durant’s book her *livre de chevet*, it is clear that the message and range of *The Mansions of Philosophy* were very important to her, and that she was an enthusiast of the book. To summarize, the ‘philosophy of life’ proposed by Durant—seeing philosophy as wisdom, and an invitation to closely connect

¹² E.T., 48. *Ety*, 51: En nu ga ik mezelf een beetje verwennen met Durant, eigenlijk moest ik dat oud-Bulgaars doen, maar daar voel ik me nou te prettig voor. Vandaag alleen maar wat aan mezelf gewerkt, maar morgen moet je weer aan het echte werk beginnen, anders heeft dit allemaal ook geen zin. Houd je taai, zus!

¹³ See *infra*, § 3, where I try to afford the question of the presence of what we now call the “philosophical practices” in Hillesum’s writings.

¹⁴ E.T., 57. *Ety*, 60: Ik zou natuurlijk de Bijbel kunnen lezen iedere ochtend, maar ik geloof dat ik daar nog niet rijp voor ben, dat de innerlijke rust daarvoor nog niet groot genoeg is en ik graaf ook nog te veel met m’n hersens naar de bedoelingen van dat Boek, zodat het nog geen verdiepen wordt. Ik denk, dat ik iedere ochtend maar wat zal lezen in ‘In de Hof der Wijsbegeerte’.

¹⁵ Etty Hillesum in fact left definitively Amsterdam on 6 June 1943, for on 5 July 1943, the special status granted to personnel at the Camp Westerbork section of the Jewish Council came to an end.

philosophy and experience, philosophy and personal existence—deeply inspired Hillesum.¹⁶

2.2. *A Lexicographical Inquiry*

A second ‘philological’ approach that we should consider is the lexicographical one. I will try here to give an idea of what this research field may entail. It is relatively simple to build a particular concordance of those terms or semantic fields we are interested in. Obviously this is another analytical operation. We can ask ourselves what was it precisely that Hillesum wrote about philosophy, and we can look for an answer, working from the Dutch text, by analyzing how Hillesum used the word ‘philosophy’ (and other words semantically connected to it) in her works.

In the exercise books and in the letters, the word ‘philosophy’ (Dutch: *Philosophie* or *Wijsbegeerte*)—or its derivatives—appears altogether thirty times. A lexicographer may say this is not a high frequency. It is not difficult, then, to consider these occurrences.

The first time one of these words appears in Hillesum’s works is in the first pages of the diary, when she reports an evaluation that Spier did of her personality, saying that she was “philosophically and intuitively gifted.”¹⁷ From the very start of her work, Hillesum presents herself with clearly dissonant credentials: documenting her inner conflicts and her psychological distress, even as she refers to her philosophical education, which she does not deny or discuss.

Furthermore, the terms ‘philosophy’ and derivatives are used by Hillesum in her diary when she wants to refer to her readings, or to thinkers or philosophical texts.¹⁸ The noun ‘philosopher’ is used in adjective or adverb form, to qualify the profile or the figure of some individuals whom she mentions in the diary, whether positive or negative.¹⁹

¹⁶ Surely, a comparison of Hillesum wording in her writings, and of the world-view that she expresses, with what we find in Durant’s book may be altogether a possible line for a critical inquiry. We may compare, for example, what Hillesum wrote about history with what Durant says in the VIth part of his book, devoted precisely to the philosophy of history. Or we may compare some of Hillesum’s expressions with what we find in Durant’s chapters devoted to pessimism or to the question “is life worth living?” or on the quest for happiness, and so on.

¹⁷ E.T., 4–5. *Ety*, 5: [...] filosofisch, intuïtief begabt [...].

¹⁸ See, for example, E.T., 42, 71 and 210; *Ety*, 44, 75, 219.

¹⁹ Four of five occurrences. See, for example, E.T., 68 and 202; *Ety*, 72, 211.

Another kind of use is linked to the conversations and discussions she had with friends and acquaintances, to refer to their content and ‘method.’²⁰

Finally, there are a number of references, about ten, in which the connotation of the term ‘philosophy’ and its derivatives is clearly negative and critical; a connotation which diminishes philosophy and philosophizing. Hillesum affirms that direct and specific attention aimed at the people around us comes before ‘vague philosophizing,’ whether it is the girl to whom you give lessons or the first stranger or unknown man you meet on the street.²¹

While she reflects on the “harmony between life and the desk,” she mentions an old expression of her father’s which says that a man who makes envelopes in a post office is far more useful than a student of philosophy.²² Faced with an oppressive schedule on an ordinary day, she tells herself that the only thing to do is not to philosophize on it but “simply get down to following it.”²³ A particularly significant passage in the text shows a confrontation between Hillesum’s philosophy and her father’s, which she considers to be resigned and superficial, albeit witty and sparkling.²⁴

All of these references should be taken into account, and surely need a closer analysis than the one I am able to give here, in my general comments on the character of Hillesum’s use of the semantic field of ‘philosophy.’ She seems to use the terms we are considering in a fairly common and unoriginal way. It is noteworthy that there is a relatively high frequency of usage with a negative connotation. However, this is typical when philosophy is dealt with in the language of common sense. And since Greek times philosophers themselves have argued in response that he who despises philosophy is, himself, actually philosophizing.

Anyway, it is not when Hillesum writes explicitly of philosophy that we find expressions of her philosophical spirit. It seems to me that in the lexicon at her disposal she does not find adequate words to express and to communicate her particular philosophical experience. Statements about her inability to express herself are common in her

²⁰ See, for example, E.T., 27, 334, 358. *Etty*, 28, 349, 375.

²¹ Cf. E.T., 8; *Etty*, 9.

²² Cf. E.T., 77; *Etty*, 81.

²³ E.T., 117. *Etty*, 124: [...] doe maar.—

²⁴ See E.T., 160; *Etty*, 168.

diaries.²⁵ And this also seems to be the case with regard to her philosophical experience.

However, it does not follow from what we have said that Hillesum lacks a clear position regarding the choice of which philosophical attitude to assume. To the contrary, she clearly expresses a rather elaborate criticism of philosophy intended as theory or system.

That is your disease: you want to capture life in formulas of your own. You want to embrace all aspects of life with your intellect instead of allowing yourself to be embraced by life. You want to create the world all over again each time, instead of enjoying it as it is. There is something compulsive about it all.²⁶

We form fixed ideas about the things around us in order to have some certainty in this confusing, ever-shifting life of ours, but in doing so we sacrifice real life with all its nuances and elements of surprise, as well as selling it short.

Life cannot be forced into a system. Nor can people, or literature. And it is to systems, sometimes built with great hardship, that men sacrifice reality and truth. It may be better to leave the word 'truth' out of this argument. Man's urge to systematize, to combine a host of contradictions into a solid structure, is also a quest for truth. And we do need some system, often to escape from chaos. But we must also be able to let go of it again.²⁷

²⁵ E.T., 527: One thing I now know for certain: I shall never be able to put down in writing what life itself has spelled out for me in living letters. I have read it all, with my own eyes, and felt it with many senses. I shall never be able to repeat it. It would be enough to make me despair had I not learned to accept that one must work with the inadequate powers one has been given—but that one must really work with them.—[*Ety*, 558: Eén ding weet ik nu al heel zeker: ik zal het nooit zo kunnen neerschrijven, als het leven zelf het in z'n levende letters voor me neergeschreven heeft. Ik heb het alles gelezen, met eigen ogen en met vele zintuigen. Ik zal het nooit zo kunnen navertellen. Dit zou me wanhopig kunnen maken, als ik niet had leren aanvaarden, dat men werken moet met de ontoereikende krachten, die men heeft, maar dat men dan ook daarmee werken moet.—]

²⁶ E.T., 119. *Ety*, 126: Dat is je ziekte: je wilt het leven vangen in eigen formules. Je wilt alle verschijnselen van dit leven omvatten met je geest inplaats van je zelf te laten omvatten door het leven. Hoe was het ook nog maar: Je hoofd in de hemel steken, dat gaat. Maar de hemel in je hoofd steken, dat gaat niet. Je wilt iedere keer zelf de wereld opnieuw scheppen, inplaats van de wereld te genieten, zoals ze is. Daar zit iets dwingelandijachtigs in.

²⁷ E.T., 180. *Ety*, 189: Wij vormen ons bepaalde voorstellingen over de dingen om ons heen, om zekerheden te hebben in dit eeuwig in beweging zijnde en verwarrende leven, maar daardoor offeren wij het werkelijke leven, in al zijn nuanceringen en onverwachtheden op, en doen wij het eigenlijk onrecht aan. Het leven is niet in een systeem te vangen. Ook niet een mens. Ook niet literatuur. En aan het, soms moeizaam verworven systeem, wordt teveel werkelijkheid en waarheid geofferd. Het

We stop halfway and relieve ourselves with words, reflections, philosophies, theoretical treatises and what have you. We stop in the middle of experiencing our emotions, can bear and endure them no further, and our brains come to our aid, rid us of our burden and build their theories on it. Won't the end be that Western Europe will have spawned a host of philosophies, etc., while Russia has kept her counsel? What we shall then hear from Russia will be cries straight from her soul, and it won't matter whether or not everything will be all that logical and consistent—it will have been experienced to the full, and that is what matters. For Westerners, theories and systems must fit together much more closely, otherwise they feel that their lives lack a solid basis. They do not endure and experience, bear and suffer, to the full; there is a flaw here in their vitality, a flaw in their capacity to bear things. And hence it is far more vitally important to them that their theories should constitute coherent wholes and not be full of contradictions. To the Russian that does not matter. It is terribly expressed. No doubt I shall be able to put it more clearly in time.²⁸

In these texts, it is clear that Etty Hillesum takes Durant's approach, whose position has recently been defined as one of 'perpectivism,' but she reworks it in a critical and open way.

There is a way of seeing the practice of thinking that goes much further than philosophy, simply defined as "total perspective, as mind overspreading life and forging chaos into unity." This was one of Durant's suggestions noted by Hillesum. Life, she says resolutely,

woord waarheid hier misschien liever buiten spel laten. Die drang in de mensen om te systematiseren, om de vele tegenstrijdigheden in één hechte bouw te verenigen, is óók waar, is een waarachtige drang. En men moet iedere keer weer tot een systeem komen, om te ontkomen aan de chaos. Maar men moet het ook weer los kunnen laten.

²⁸ E.T., 453. *Etty*, 478: Wij houden halverwege op met dragen en bevrijden ons met woorden, beschouwingen, filosofieën, theoretische verhandelingen, wat je maar wilt. Midden in het ondergaan der ontroeringen houden we op en kunnen niet verder dragen en lijden en onze hersens komen te hulp, ontnemen ons de lasten en bouwen hun theorieën op. En zou het niet daardoor komen, dat West-Europa zoveel geproduceerd heeft aan filosofieën enz. en in Rusland op dit gebied een groot zwijgen heerst? En wát er dan uit Rusland komt zijn kreten, regelrecht uit de ziel en het doet er niet toe of dat alles erg logisch en sluitend is, het is daar beleefd tot op de bodem en daarom gaat het. Bij de Westerlingen moeten zijn theorieën en systemen veel passender in elkaar sluiten, omdat hun leven anders nergens een gesloten en hechte basis heeft. Ondergaan en beleven en dragen en lijden doen ze niet tot op de bodem, hier zit er een zwakte in hun levenskracht, een zwakte in hun draagkracht. En daarom is het voor hun van veel groter levensbelang, dat hun theorieën sluitende gehelen vormen en niet vol tegenspraak zijn. Bij de Rus doet dat er niet toe. Beestachtig slecht geformuleerd. Het zal nog wel eens duidelijker in me worden.

cannot be compressed into *any* system. After you have found a philosophy of life, or notwithstanding it, you inevitably *go back to the chaos itself that you find in life's experience*, in your day-to-day life. So, Hillesum seems to recognize that it is thinking that inhabits being, and that it is not being that is assumed in thinking to become its 'object' ...

The core of the experience Hillesum writes about may be found in a thinking attitude open to real life, with its nuances, its contradictions. Hillesum's attitude reminds me of an existential stance expressed in a philosophical play on words of the English term 'understand,' by one of my masters:

To understand is to stand-under the spell of the thing which we understand, it is to be got by the spell of the thing, and stand under it in admiration, or perhaps scepticism. It is an existential attitude, we stand really under the power of the risky act of knowing (*inter-legere*). To know, as the Upanishads and Thomas Aquinas (following Aristotle) explicitly said, meant to identify ourselves with the thing known. Now, due to the shift of meaning of the notion of knowledge, introduced and popularised by the modern so-called natural sciences, to understand has been reduced to being able to foresee, calculate, and dominate. In a word, we claim to understand by "overstanding." If we "overstand," we simply apply our own categories or superstructures. We superimpose them in order to recognize the object, and no longer to understand the thing.²⁹

Certainly, Hillesum seems to be in search of a *philosophy of life*, even as she is aware that every explanation of life relegated to a systematic form entails a falsification and a departure and estrangement from life itself. She wants to understand life, in the sense of the above quotation. At the same time, her quest for harmony (rather than 'coherence') between everyday life and ideal is strong:

My life's task will be to establish a true harmony between "life" and desk.³⁰

Unless every smallest detail in your daily life is in harmony with the high ideals you profess, then those ideals have no meaning.³¹

²⁹ Raimon Panikkar, "The Pluralism of Truth," *World Faiths Insight* 26 (1990), 7–16, esp. 7.

³⁰ E.T., 76. *Ethy*, 81: Het zal de opgave van jouw leven zijn een werkelijke innerlijke harmonie te brengen tussen dat "leven" en het bureau.

³¹ E.T., 334. *Ethy*, 349: Wanneer niet het kleinste detail in je dagelijkse leven er naar streeft in harmonie te komen met de hogere ideeën, die je belijdt, dan hebben die ideeën geen zin.

Regarding this perspective, a passage in her diaries dated 30 November 1941 deserves particular attention.³² The English version makes use of the terms “philosophy / philosophies,” but in the Dutch original we find instead “vision of life,” “way of seeing life” (Dutch: *levensbeschouwing* / *levensbeschouwingen*). Furthermore, Hillesum states that when she is in front of any “vision of life” whatsoever, she cannot keep herself from suspecting that it may hide something deceitful, that “the truth” is always violated.³³ Hillesum probably intends to stress what she thinks of as the ineffable nature of reality in every word, every theory, every system.

And yet, she goes on to say that she herself aims at “a fenced-in space of my own, violently seized and passionately defended.”³⁴ She speaks as if she were faced with a dilemma. On one hand, the need for an orderly vision of life (that is to say a ‘philosophy’ that may ‘set in order the chaos’). On the other hand, she realizes that in this vision of life truth, and also life itself, may suffer. Hillesum recognizes “the need for a theory or system,” but she also wants to make its significance and importance more relative.

It is also interesting to note that in the sentence in which she confesses her ‘need’ for a vision of life, she does not use the specific term *levensbeschouwing*, about which she is actually thinking, and instead uses metaphors. A similar metaphor and aphorism by Kierkegaard comes to mind:

In relation to their systems most systematizers are like a man who builds an enormous castle and lives in a shack close by; they do not live in their own enormous systematic buildings. However, spiritually that is a decisive objection. Spiritually speaking, a man’s thought must be the building in which he lives, otherwise everything is topsy-turvy.³⁵

Hillesum, in fact, slightly corrects Kierkegaard’s metaphor of thinking as ‘habitation.’ The passages we have quoted seem to suggest that for Hillesum it is the act of thinking that has to be accomplished in order

³² E.T., 159; *Etty*, 167–168.

³³ E.T., 159 [translation revised]. *Etty*, 167–168: Toch bij mij altijd weer het gevoel, dat er in iedere bewust verdedigde levensbeschouwing bedrog sluipt. Dat er steeds weer wordt verkracht ten koste van “de waarheid”.

³⁴ E.T., 159. *Etty*, 168: En toch moet ik er zelf en wil ik er zelf ook naar streven, naar een stuk eigen omheind, eerst bloedig veroverd, later hartstochtelijk verdedigd terrein.

³⁵ *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, tr. A. Dru (New York: Harper & Bro., 1959), 98.

to inhabit life. In the end, this is no minor issue in the field of philosophy itself: our attitudes toward the relationship between thinking and being, between thought and reality, are at stake.

In any case, it is worthwhile to mention some provisional conclusions of this ‘lexicographical analysis.’ Studying the occurrences of Hillesum’s use of the term ‘philosophy’ and its derivatives encourages us to enlarge our semantic perspective in our investigation. It is clearly necessary to explore a much larger semantic field and include other terms, such as, ‘vision of life’ (Dutch: *levensbeschouwing*), ‘spirituality’ (Dutch: *spiritualiteit*), ‘self-realisation’ (Dutch: *zelfverwerkelijking*), and the semantic field connected to ‘myself’ (Dutch: *aan mezelf, in mezelf*, etc.); also, ‘think/thinker’ (Dutch: *denk, denker*), ‘wisdom’ (Dutch: *wijsheid*), ‘meditation’ (Dutch: *meditatie*), ‘inner voice’ (Dutch: *innerlijke stem*), etc.

The writings of Etty Hillesum break down some of the barriers that often keep certain fields distinct and separate—philosophy and religion, philosophy and literature or poetry, philosophy and spirituality, philosophy and mysticism, etc. Indeed, it is not simply a ‘philosophy of life’ that Hillesum is in search of and tries to describe.

Our inquiry, then, need not be limited in scope to naming the great philosophers she read and quoted, nor the authors she admired. The core of our inquiry is not about the ‘topoi’ of her *Weltanschauung*, or her vision of life or of the world, or the concepts and contents of thought that she expresses.³⁶ This is because Etty Hillesum has left us something more than a simple philosophy ‘of’ life. Her works suggest that our uncertainty towards life’s chaos and its demands asks for a *philosophical life*. This is why, in the remaining section of this paper, I will emphasize the alchemic approach.

3. The “Alchemic” Approach

If Etty Hillesum’s works are thought-provoking, that is because they are life-provoking and being-provoking. I do not have sufficient space

³⁶ I mention here, briefly and concisely, with absolute incompleteness, some of those possible ‘topoi’ (the ‘contents’ or topics of her *levensbeschouwing*): God, the self and caring for the self; love for life; the evil; suffering, sorrow and pain; violence (and nonviolence), and the loss of innocence; opposition to victimization; dislike for a formalistic ethic, or ‘indifference’ and relativization of ethics; apophatism; war and nazis contexts; ways out of barbarism; feminist thinking and not just feminist writing; ... and so on and so forth.

here to elaborate on the theme I want to suggest, so I will give a short summary.

3.1. *An Experiential Exploration: The Involvement of the Reader*

Beyond the historical-critical and lexicographical readings, Etty Hillesum's works deserve to be explored through *par coeur* reading. We have to greet the text as it is, to accept it, to listen to its living voice that speaks to us and questions us. We have to recognize its stance and direction, its profound tension (or tensions), the one, or ones, that give life to it.³⁷ Etty Hillesum's works are not self-referential texts, even if classified among works devoted to intimate and personal diaries or to the writings of the self. They are texts in which a life of profound significance (if not authenticity) is 'mirrored'³⁸ and which provokes the reader. The texts have a generative and empathic force. They involve us, and they feed and may transform us.

In all cases, the nature of Etty Hillesum's work invites us to an attitude of detachment towards the very instruments and techniques of our critiques. We ought to be able to filter our own analyses and to step back from our interpretations. We need to decant every technical investigation and leave space for different ways of listening—that is, ones connected to being personally involved, and ones from personal experience. And all of that has to be developed *without* departing from our analyses, of course, but by attempting to *transcend* them, entering new dimensions and levels of our reading and understanding.

3.2. *Philosophical Living*

The experiences of thought expressed in the spiritual exercise of her diaries (and also in her letters) surely do not represent the quest for an original *Weltanschauung*, or a new vision of the world—even if they end up being that. The thought experiences expressed by Hillesum tend *to creatively transform her way of being* (her own personal way of being, and perhaps the ways of others). It is an experience focussed on the

³⁷ Cf. the interview to Jean Starobinski by Nuccio Ordine in: *Corriere della Sera*, 15 November 2008.

³⁸ If it is acceptable to have recourse to this metaphor: 'mirroring' between life and text has to be intended here including and inscribing inevitable degrees of distortion that have to be critically considered, of course.

resumption of a mostly ignored aspect, remaining in our formal philosophical tradition, especially the modern one. It is within the scope of taking care of oneself (*epimeleia sou*) which many works of Michel Foucault address.³⁹

Hillesum expresses the need to care for herself with the expression ‘work on myself’ (Dutch: *aan mezelf werken*). She is not far from an awareness that the transformation that she needs also demands ‘spiritual exercises,’ rather than for example athletic ones.

In reality, it is an *a-methodical method* that is explored, similar to the one that characterizes the philosophizing of many male and female philosophers.⁴⁰ The whole of her philosophical practices need not be emphasized or formalized here. Her ‘spiritual exercises’ can be identified with a certain precision and also compared with those mentioned in historical essays about philosophical practises as experienced by the ancient philosophers.

According to Pierre Hadot, the ancient Greeks believed philosophy was “something that had to be acted out, something practical,” as Simone Weil said. Philosophy meant a way of living, not just a certain moral behaviour, but a precise way to exist in the world, “a way of life that brought tranquillity to the soul, interior freedom and cosmic consciousness.” It is not a discourse *about* anything, not theory, “but an individual act that consisted in living integrally,” a “therapy intended to heal anxiety,” the exercise of thought, of will, in short, of the whole person. The aim (wisdom or knowledge) was recognized as probably being out of reach. So the exercises themselves became the very heart of philosophy and the centre of attention, recognized as a way to bring personal and inner transformation.⁴¹

For Hillesum, these ‘philosophical practices’ offer the chance for inner transformation (and outer and interpersonal, in reality). They make possible, as Hadot says, real conversion (*metanoia*). For Hillesum, in fact, that was *desnacer*, as Zambrano says—so much so that

³⁹ See in particular: *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar With Michel Foucault*, eds. L.H. Martin, H. Gutman, H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

⁴⁰ Cf. Luigina Mortari, *Un metodo a-metodico: La pratica della ricerca in Maria Zambrano* (Napoli: Liguori, 2006).

⁴¹ But it has to be seen in its integrity the masterpiece of Pierre Hadot, *Exercices Spirituels et Philosophie Antique* (Paris: Études augustinienes, 1981; Paris: Albin Michel, 2002²).

she decided to change the day in which she celebrated her birthday to remember this central moment in her life. *Metanoia* does not actually mean to change a point of view (changing from one concept of the world to another), but more precisely to transcend the mental field itself, of the *noūs* (of course, this does not require denying it).⁴²

I will here note here some of the ‘philosophical practises’ that Hillesum’s works clearly witness and document. I apologize for being necessarily schematic and unable to give full evidence with the support of the text themselves in this article.

Writing, first of all, according to Hadot, is one of the great ‘spiritual exercises.’ For Hillesum, it is not simply a therapeutic matter, nor a simple clinical instrument. Her exercise books are ‘existential diaries.’ Her writings express not just a feminine hand, but I think also a feminine thought, that has, we might say, a specific ‘ontonomic’ charter. That is to say that Hillesum’s writings are testimony to a different way of thinking, different from the rational and systematic one, or the speculative one.

She moves from a ‘philosophy *of*’ to a ‘philosophy *with*.’ She transcends the speculative practice based on the construction of theories, models, systems. She transcends the practice known as ‘the labour of the concept.’ She is not worried about building any discourse *on* reality or being. She does not pretend to ‘get closer’ to being or reality, because she feels in herself and around her, I believe, the possibility of a full life, of the fullness of life. She does not seek it ‘outwardly’ (certainly not through theories and systems, as we have seen).

Her ‘philosophizing’ is about embracing her relations with every being, in the concrete and real context in which she has been thrown. She practises listening, she tries to accept and to greet, and to interact energetically and with full consciousness with every ‘piece of reality,’ leaving written traces of all of those practices. Her ‘philosophizing’ is built, in fact, on another strong base of the ancient philosophical practises, or spiritual exercises, that is *dialogue*. Dialoguing is a spiritual exercise too.

I used the term ‘philosophize with’: the words of Luce Irigaray. In a recent publication, she sheds light on the philosophy practised by Hillesum. Philosophy is not just “love for wisdom” but also “wisdom

⁴² Cf. Raimon Panikkar, *Cultural Disarmament: The Way to Peace* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), 25.

of love,” or wisdom that comes from a living relationship of friendship and love, a profound and authentic dialogue between human beings. Philosophy may be born in a complex relationship of friendship and love, made possible through dialogue.⁴³

Etty Hillesum in her diaries refers to her daily conversations with people, friends or others with a clearly *dialogical* disposition. She builds her writings and her work on dialogical relationships with others, and the play of dialogical communication. They manifest a mode of inter-being, of interdependence. Hillesum shows that she let herself be transformed through a process adequately named only by the Latin term ‘inter-fecundatio.’ Her way of writing is a testimony to what that Latin term means. And also, it is a matter of ‘conversation’: since, as we know, this term comes from the same root as ‘conversion.’

Philosophizing, for Hillesum, is to inhabit with clear and full consciousness and participate in everyday relationships with other entities (the world, other people, God...).

Cosmic consciousness was another feature of ancient and tardo-ancient philosophy, as Hadot discovered. Hillesum herself seems to practice feeling part of the whole, in inter-relationship with everything that exceeds human limits, under you and over you.⁴⁴ The ‘cosmic consciousness’ feels the ties that bind and connect you with everything. It does not simply mean “to bring the world within you.” We may speak instead of an intuition or insight into *teantropocosmic* harmony:⁴⁵

I still want to lose myself in everyone and in everything—a feeling of wanting to live in harmony with all that exists.⁴⁶

We can identify other ‘exercises’ in the writings of Etty Hillesum that more or less parallel those of ancient philosophy, as Hadot attests them. Here, I offer just a list of them:

- the exercise of *attention to the present*, or ‘return to the present,’ that may also connect with the ancient motto of the fleeting moment;

⁴³ Luce Irigaray, *La via dell'amore* (Turin: Boringhieri, 2008).

⁴⁴ Cf. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels...*, passim.

⁴⁵ Cf. R. Panikkar, *The Cosmoteandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1998).

⁴⁶ E.T., 75. *Etty*, 79: Ik wil nog steeds opgaan in alles en iedereen. Een gevoel van in harmonie te leven met alles wat er bestaat.

- the exercise of *thinking to death* (one of the main ancient spiritual exercises, that in many ways can be considered as the real beginning of all philosophizing);
- the exercise of *internalizing*,
- *meditation*, or the moment and space of *interior dialogue*, in Hillesum's case; sometimes it also became prayer;
- the anticipation of future harm or *vorwegnehmen*;
- the exercise of *hineinhorchen* or *hineinhören*, 'profound listening,' these two exercises well known by every good reader of Hillesum's writings.

As we see, we find a vast horizon of investigation for those of us who want to study Hillesum's works.

Before I conclude, I want to add a minor hermeneutic note, one I hope might be of some use, and in any case seems corroborated by what I have said thus far. It is quite clear that investigating Hillesum's works according to the alchemist approach cannot proceed in an authentic way if the one conducting the investigation is not involved himself, somehow, in a similar process. We cannot express any statement or judgement on these experiences (philosophical practices or spiritual exercises) using categories that are unrelated to their nature and their 'ontonomical' statute. We cannot discuss these experiences without having practised them directly and personally.

3.3. Conclusion

"Very few people, I fear, change their lives as a result of reading contemporary academic philosophy."⁴⁷ Etty Hillesum, on the contrary, teaches us that a philosophical practice does bring into play the person involved. It does not focus on the value of discourse on one subject or another, but on the value of listening, speaking, communicating, thinking, writing and interacting with others. But it does not stem from *abstract* thinking or writing or talking. It comes from us and our way of living. Existence comes before essence in philosophical practices. Authenticity is always a concern, as is our personal involvement and our personal ways of inhabiting the practices themselves.

⁴⁷ Bill McKibben, *Foreword* to: Arne Naess, with Per Ingvar Haukeland, *Life's Philosophy: Reason and Feeling in a Deeper World*, tr. Roland Huntford (Athens, GA & London: The University of Georgia Press, 2002), x.

Etty Hillesum had a connection with philosophy not only because she was attracted to it or cultivated readings by certain authors, but because her life exemplified a way to embody a *philosophical* way of being. Philosophical practice is not only a means by which to change your way of thinking, but a path to follow in changing your way of being and living in accordance with your thoughts. In this sense, I suggest that Etty Hillesum was a philosopher.