

## THE PRAYERS AND TEARS OF ETTY HILLESUM

“A Confessions of St Augustine for our day ... Etty Hillesum deserves to be read far more deeply and extensively than she has been thus far.”

Rowan Williams, Preface to Patrick Woodhouse, *Etty Hillesum: A life Transformed* p. ix

“When Etty Hillesum is read more carefully and with greater honesty, I believe she will be considered one of the most important religious figures of the past 100 years.”

Don Cupitt, *Turns of Phrase: Radical Theology A-Z* (London SCM Press 2011) p. 50.

“I have too much admiration for Pascal and Leibniz, Bach and Tolstoy – to say nothing of Gandhi, Etty Hillesum or Martin Luther King – to turn up my nose at the faith that inspired them.”

Andre Comte-Sponville, *A Book of Atheist Spirituality* (ET: Nancy Hutton, (London: Bantam Books 2007) p. 77.

In this talk I focus on Etty Hillesum’s attitude toward hatred, love and God.

Sometimes when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on [y]our earth, my eyes raised toward [y]our heaven, tears sometimes run down my face, tears of deep emotion and gratitude. At night, too, when I lie on my ‘bed’ and rest in [y]ou, oh God, tears of gratitude run down my face, and that is my prayer.<sup>1</sup>

These words were written by the 29 year old Etty Hillesum in a letter from Westerbork concentration camp, in North Holland, 20 days before her transportation with most of her family to Auschwitz where, on 30th November 1943,<sup>2</sup> she was murdered and her body burnt. Her last communication was written on a post-card<sup>3</sup> thrown from the freight wagon that transported her to the site of her death. It was found by a farmer and posted on. It reads:

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

Etty Hillesum was a secular Dutch Jew with an ebullient outgoing personality who wrote a diary between March 1941 and October 1942 at the suggestion of her Jungian Chirotherapist, a German Jew exiled in Holland, the 55 year old divorcee, Julius Spier, as part of her therapy. Etty’s diary records the events and sources of her self-reflexive introspection which, in the course of 14 months, against the background of the Shoah witnesses a personal transformation from a self-serving eroticism to an explosive giving of love toward humanity (pp. 254, 287, 475, 545, 569), the cosmos (pp. 345, 348-9) and to what Etty called ‘God’ (pp. 83, 439-440, 494, 519). Etty wanted to be a writer<sup>4</sup>. Understanding herself – to achieve inner clarity – was a first step toward understanding others, a quality, she thought, essential to a writer. Only

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<sup>1</sup> Etty Hillesum, *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943* (ET: Arnold J. Pomerans Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 2002) (henceforth *Etty* in these footnotes and in the text indicated with a page number).

<sup>2</sup> The Red Cross recorded this as the day of her death but it could have been earlier.

<sup>3</sup> A second post card was also thrown out saying similar things addressed to Maria but this has been lost. However Maria recorded its contents. It ends with Etty writing “Will you wait for me?” (*Etty* p. 669)

<sup>4</sup> At one stage she wanted to write another Brothers Karamazov. (*Etty*, p. 94) “I have a task. Everything that happens around me is to be clarified in my mind and later in my writing.” (*Etty*, p. 86)

when one's own inner waters are clear and not chaotic can the right words come to the surface. The conversations she holds with herself in the diary including her prayers<sup>5</sup> not only allow her to achieve this clarity<sup>6</sup> they also allow her to develop the courage she needs to face the threat of her imminent destruction.<sup>7</sup> According to Ulrich Lincoln and Patrick Woodhouse, she embodied Paul Tillich's 'courage to be' – "the self-affirmation of being in spite of non-being."<sup>8</sup> Her introspection, which is mostly confined to her diary rather than aired in public, affirmed her unique freedom as an individual<sup>9</sup> to refuse the process of dehumanisation and humiliation the Nazi's sought to impose and allowed her to help others find the same courage in themselves (p. 287, 433).

Julius Spier, Etty's therapist, (who has no proper name in the diary but is always called 'S' – a "nameless" name who signs his letters with a question mark (517)) brought Etty the wisdom contained in his 1,100 book library stored in the house at 6 Gabriel Metsustraat in Amsterdam (p. 695) in which Etty rented a room free of charge – she was, at the time, and had been since moving there in 1937, and remained so throughout the diary, in a sexual relationship with the 62 year old owner of the house; Han Wegerif a widower who Etty called Pa Han.<sup>10</sup> Etty was a voracious reader. She devoured Spier's books, "I will get drunk" on them, she said (p. 111): Jung, Kierkegaard<sup>11\*</sup>, Nietzsche, St Augustine, Thomas a Kempis and Meister Eckhart are just some of the writers who joined the novelists of her youth (p. 178) including Dostoevsky, Lermontov and Tolstoy passages from whom Etty translates into Dutch for her friends (218). Perhaps it should be noted that Etty conducted her everyday life in three languages: Dutch, German and Russian (she also knew Latin, Greek<sup>12</sup> and Hebrew). She supported herself by teaching Russian.<sup>13</sup> However, the chief literary influence on her life was the poet Rainer Maria Rilke<sup>14</sup> who she

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<sup>5</sup> God is one of many dialogue partners of the diary – one which grows substantially after the death of 'S'. Other prominent dialogue partners include Rilke, Pa Han, Kathe, her Parents, Tide and Mischa. There is also her dialogue with her self-chiding voice, the two trees outside her window, (*Etty* p. 454, 306) her beloved untidy desk (*Etty* p. 400, 603), her lamp (*Etty*, p. 182), the moon (*Etty* p. 93), stars (*Etty* p. 178 -179) books, the bookcase and many flowers (pp. 478, 568). These are all what Ulrich Lincoln calls, "dialogical realities within her reflection". Etty gives an account of herself through these various personified fields and as Lincoln puts it, "this desire to give an account of herself is worked out in the presence of that fictitious other who is called God" Ulrich Lincoln, 'The Courage to Write: Biography and Religion in Etty Hillesum and Soren Kierkegaard' in Klaas A. D. Smelik *et al* (eds.) *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill 2017) pp161 and 162. This dialogue with God increasingly expresses itself in prayer "oh God my life is one great dialogue with [y]ou" (*Etty* p. 640)

<sup>6</sup> That she felt she had achieved this is clear from what she says in her last diary entry before departing for Westerbork in July 1942 p. 512

<sup>7</sup> "Scribbling away in this exercise book ... in order to take the fullest possible stock of all the many processes within myself" she says is the proper way to achieve both "a healthy physical as well as mental state" p. 110 [using an alternative translation by Rachel Feldhay Brenner, *Etty Hillesum: A Portrait of a Holocaust Artist* in *Hillesum* in Klaas A.D. Smelik *et al* (ed.) *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill 2010 ) p241

<sup>8</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (Collins: Glasgow 1952) p. 152. See Ulrich Lincoln, *op. cit.*, p. 169. P. Woodhouse, *Etty Hillesum: A Life Transformed* (London: Continuum 2009) pp. 147-152

<sup>9</sup> Etty writes, "I am able to concentrate despite bombs and concentration camps and horror stories and a million corpses, because I believe in the mission of the individual and also in my own small mission." (*Etty*, p. 122)

<sup>10</sup> Officially, Etty was Han Wegerif's 'house keeper', although she did very little in this respect, the position allowed her to remain living in a house owned by an Aryan (*Etty*, p. 475, 739).

<sup>11</sup> Sometimes she has to remind herself that life is more than reading these books, "I don't want you to think of anything today," she tells herself, "not of Freud, not of Jung, not of Kierkegaard, not of Dostoevsky and not of Stendhal" (*Etty*, p. 119). While we are on this theme, Etty notes that S asked her to write an essay on Kant (*Etty*, p. 312) but this has not survived.

<sup>12</sup> She read Plato's *Apology* in Greek with her father's help (p. 194)

<sup>13</sup> At one point in the diary she says she would declare her occupation on any official form as "teacher of Russian" (*Etty* p. 480).

sites over 150 times in the diary. Beside Spier, she says, Rilke is “my greatest teacher ... who fills my days and is part of my being.” (pp. 447, 533). She is absorbed in Rilke.<sup>15</sup> She wants to share Rilke’s muse (pp. 311, 321, 323). There is more reality in a poem by Rilke, she says, than a falling man from a plane (p. 86), a cheese coupon or chilblains<sup>16</sup> (p. 184). Rilke’s poetry and Spier’s therapy help guide her diary reflections (p. 326) encouraging a deep listening to “all that lies buried in me and cries out to be let out” (pp. 340-1)<sup>17</sup>. In tune with Rilke’s verse she determines to live “**as if**” in eternity (pp. 243, 314). “I always return to Rilke” she says in her final diary entry. Indeed, as Susan Guber has argued, Etty succeeded in living out Rilke’s proleptic verse<sup>18</sup> (*Etty* pp. 497, 461-3). She did so in full knowledge (informed by the BBC and her friends<sup>19</sup>) that, in her words, “in Poland the killers seem to be in full cry” (pp. 456) – “burying us alive or exterminating us with gas” (p. 484, 654). – Having noted reports that “700,000 Jews perished last year in Germany and the occupied territories,” she immediately adds “And yet I find life beautiful and meaningful. ... And I shall stay at this desk to the last minute and have faith in every poem I read.” (459) A hint, perhaps, that any religious attitude she happens to have will be theopoetic. I am willing, she writes, “to ‘yield’ myself up to God, or to a poem”<sup>20</sup> (p. 188).

Rilke gave Etty an alternative perspective on the “dreadfully sad and shameful” (p. 587) slice of human history (p. 369) she lives through and wanted to chronicle.<sup>21</sup> She hoped, in the future,<sup>22</sup> to wield her “fountain pen as if it were a hammer ... to beat out the story of our fate” (p. 484) a story she says, “One is ashamed one stood by and was unable to prevent” (p. 587). But, she admits, the history she would write would be an alternative reality to that likely to be recorded in most text books (p. 358, 525, **531**,

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<sup>14</sup> For a good account of this influence see Patrick Woodhouse, ‘The Influence of Rainer Maria Rilke on the Mind and Heart of Etty Hillesum’ in Klaas A. D. Smelik *et al* (eds.) *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill 2017) pp. 285-298

<sup>15</sup> “To me, the Rilke letters are like an ocean into which I swim ever deeper and ever further” (*Etty* p. 321) “He [Rilke] is constantly in my mind” (*Etty* p. 322). She debates Rilke with ‘Spier’ (*Etty* pp. 196-7 and p. 178). “My most fervent desire: to read the whole of Rilke – everything he has ever written ... to take it all in, and then to cast him off, to forget him and to live on my own substance again” (*Etty* p. 337 also see pp. 275 and 330). Like Rilke she wanted to fashion out a bed of rose petals in words (p. 398) She says that she will “be writing and impressive paper” on Rilke in ten years (*Etty*, 303).

<sup>16</sup> Or “moving a house” (*Etty*, p. 94)

<sup>17</sup> The language she uses to describe the development of her inner life such as the ripening and growing cornfields is taken from Rilke (*Etty* pp. 197, 246) Also see Woodhouse *op. cit.*, p. 295.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Guber ‘Falling for Etty Hillesum’ in *Common Knowledge* Vol. 12 No. 2 2006 pp. 282 also 289, 292-3, 297. Also see Johannes Wich-Schwarz, *Transformation of Language and Religion in Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: Peter Lang 2012) pp. 74. Etty followed Rilke’s advice ‘you must go inside yourself.’ (*Etty*, p. 497).

<sup>19</sup> “And the English Radio has reported that 700,000 Jews perished last year in Germany and the occupied territories. And even if we stay alive, we shall carry the wounds with us throughout our lives” (pp. 455-6). Klaas D. D. Smelik reports that his father had told Etty of the gassing of Jews (see Klaas A. D. Smelik, ‘Etty Hillesum’s Reaction to the Persecution of Her People’ Klaas in A. D. Smelik *et al* (eds.) *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill 2017) pp. 258-9

<sup>20</sup> Rather than ‘lose’ herself in ‘S’ she would yield to God or a poem (*Etty*, p. 188). She writes, “The only fulfilment for me now is to lose myself in a piece of prose or in a poem with each word of which I have to wrestle” (*Etty*, p. 167)

<sup>21</sup> To be the “ears and eyes of a piece of Jewish history” (*Etty* p. 644 Also p. 86)

<sup>22</sup> Manja Pach ‘Let’s Talk About Hope: Etty Hillesum’s Future Perspective – We May suffer, But we Must Not Succumb’ in Klaas A.D. Smelik *et al* (ed.) *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill 2010) pp 351-363 highlights the many passages in the diary where Etty expressed her hope of surviving the war and of writing about it afterword (e.g *Etty*, pp. 478, 483, 484, 506, 510, 542, 608). At one stage she had in mind surviving something like Dostoyevsky’s 4 years in a Siberian prison (*Etty* p. 493). But she also knew it was the total destruction and annihilation of the Jews that the Nazi’s wanted (*Etty* p. 461, 631)

550). Hers would be a reality of small detail<sup>23</sup> such as the cyclist triumphantly wearing the yellow star “like the first crocus in spring” (p. 358) on the day it was introduced in the Netherlands. And, although she says to herself “Come now, Etty my girl, things aren’t ... as congenial as you make out ... you really seem to gloss things over with your flights of poetry,” this alternative poetic reality frees her from being overwhelmed by bitterness and hatred at what most other people called reality.<sup>24</sup> Her tears are Rilke’s clear tears (p. 512): the poet’s tears that see the fragile world through gratitude and love. They are tears of compassion that well up in her at the delicate, contingent beauty of weeping lilies and dying tea roses<sup>25</sup> (p. 435) and at Westerbork are mistaken for emotional frailty.<sup>26</sup> Gleaned from Matthew’s Gospel<sup>27</sup> and Rilke, the birds of the air and the lilies of the field become the poetic tropes of her tears which merge into her prayers (p. 640).<sup>28</sup> Together,<sup>29</sup> they help **free** her inner life from worry about the terror (p. 434) if not from the terror’s effects on her body<sup>30</sup> (p. 514) – which, she says, is less important anyway.<sup>31</sup> In return, Guber notes, Etty rescues Rilke from an inauthentic aestheticism<sup>32</sup> which is, perhaps, why Helene Cixous can write that “Rilke owes an immense amount to Etty Hillesum.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Such as: comfortable chairs bought with insurance money paid out due to a bomb-damaged house – or “a cup of coffee, good friends, a happy atmosphere and a little philosophising.” (*Etty* p. 358)

<sup>24</sup> “my realities may be different from what most people call reality, but still they are realities” (*Etty*, p. 595)

<sup>25</sup> It is not anything determinately religious that makes Etty want to believe in God but the emotions that arise within her contemplating the delicate fragility of a yellow tea rose (*Etty* pp. 422 (734) 426, 435, 445), the beauty of life holistically conceived (*Etty* pp. 208-209) and her love of humanity (*Etty*, pp. 491-2).

<sup>26</sup> (*Etty*) p.762

<sup>27</sup> Matt 6:28, Matt 10 18-19 are quoted (cf *Etty*, pp 28, 323, 328-329, 530, 631, 706, 748, 752, 776)

<sup>28</sup> For reference to the bird see *Etty*, p.276 (where Rilke uses the freedom of birds as a trope for the outer world within see *Etty* p. 334, 413, 416, 499, 509, 516, 616)

<sup>29</sup> To follow her own analogy, her diary is like a womb in which the seed of her future writing will gestate it will be inseminated by the Bible and Rilke (*Etty* p. 330) “the feeling these last few days that I’ll be getting up in the middle of the night sometime soon to write a book. A feeling of being pregnant; mentally pregnant, and of wanting to bring something into the world at long last.” (*Etty* p. 330) If suddenly forced to move to Westerbork she imagines what books she would take with her, The Bible, Rilke’s *Book of Hours* and his *Letters to a Young Poet* would go with her as would Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* to keep up her Russian (*Etty* pp. 480, 486, 494). Elsewhere she lists Rilke and Jung would go with her (p. 508). We know she took Rilke, the Bible, the Qur’an and her small Russian dictionaries.

<sup>30</sup> Her mind and her heart accept the suffering she must endure but her body takes a while to catch up. There is no body/soul dualism here. Etty states on a number of occasions that body and soul are one. (*Etty* pp. 121, 225, 304). It is when she writes not as a diarist or a poet but as a journalist in her 24<sup>th</sup> August letter smuggled out from the camp that the terror makes her quake inside and places a question mark against her faith in God and humanity (*Etty* p. 644) see an alternative translation in Ria van de Brandt, *Etty Hillesum: An Introduction to Her Thought* (ET Harry Monkel Berlin LIT 2014) p. 120)) p. 104. But even here Etty’s soon restores her trust in God as later letters suggest.

<sup>31</sup> Etty writes “It doesn’t matter whether my untrained body will be able to carry on, that is really of secondary importance; the main thing is that even as we die a terrible death we are able to feel right to the very last moment that life has meaning and beauty, that we have realised our potential and lived a good life.” (*Etty* p. 474) In a letter she wrote they must do more than simply try to save their bodies new meaning must also radiate from the camps. (*Etty*, p. 587)

<sup>32</sup> Although she says Rilke was not soft (*Etty*, p. 247), perhaps, she recognises this herself when she writes of Rilke “Someone so frail, who did most of his writing within protective castle walls would perhaps have been broken by the circumstances in which we now live.” (p. 550)

<sup>33</sup> Helene Cixous, Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector and Tsvetayeva in Susan Guber ‘Falling for Etty Hillesum’ in *Common Knowledge* Vol. 12 No. 2 2006 pp. 281. 296-7. Cixous adds, “An exchange of life exists between the two” (see Denise De Costa, Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: Inscripting Spirituality and Sexuality (ET Mischa F. C. Hoyinck and Robert E. Chesal New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1998) p. 199. Guber writes that the themes of Rilke’s poetry “the instability of desire, the powerlessness of love, death of the unfulfilled or the innocent, the fragility of the earth, the alienation of consciousness ... were the expression of her [Etty’s] own lived experience” Guber, *op. cit.*, p. 297

Etty writes, “A camp needs a poet, one who experiences life, even there, as a bard and is able to sing about it” (p. 542). And later employs the poetic tropes of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field as a filter through which the horrors of the camp can be described:

The 35 freight cars had been completely sealed, but a plank had been left out here and there, and people put their hands through the gaps and waved as if they were drowning. *The sky is full of birds, the purple lupins stand up so regally* ... [two women chat] ... the sun is shining on my face – and right before our eyes, mass murder. The whole thing is simply beyond comprehension. (p. 602 – italics added)

From the beginning of her diary Etty recognises the problem she trusts Spier to help her overcome. Her inner life is “too greedy” and yearns to own everything of beauty<sup>34</sup> (pp. 23-26). She fears her “abundant compassion” leans too much toward “self-gratification” rather than “positive creativity” (p. 13). Her inner life was too chaotic to allow her poetic voice to emerge. For example, she admits to wanting to own Spier sexually<sup>35</sup> and was jealous of his other female patients (pp. 249, 418) and his young fiancé, Hertha, waiting for him in London, even though, she says, “my heart was not in it” (p. 46, 285). What comes across in the early part of the diary<sup>36</sup> is a witty<sup>37</sup>, outwardly confident and intelligent woman with a degree in Law and a self-proclaimed “sunny optimism” (p. 554) who, nevertheless, has a chaotic inner life and a sense that there is something wrong with her capacious desire to inwardly own in her heart all that is of beauty and value around her and this blocks a profound sense of poetic creativity brewing within her.<sup>38</sup>

### **Working on Herself**

With the help of Spier (henceforth referred to here as S) she adopted the practice she called her “spiritual hygiene” (p. 58, 243) which included the discipline of diary writing, mediation and prayer. At this point it is the work she does on herself that is the source of her suffering rather than anything coming from the outside world although the Nazi measures against the Jews are occasionally referred to (pp. 31-2, 44, 52-3, 61, 62, 86, 97, 238-9, 227, **296**, 329, 358, 386). She notes, for example, that “We Jews<sup>39</sup> are being crowded into ever smaller spaces”<sup>40</sup> (p. 469).

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<sup>34</sup> Also see here Denise De Costa, Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: Inscribing Spirituality and Sexuality (ET Mischa F. C. Hoyinck and Robert E. Chesal New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1998) pp. 187-8.

<sup>35</sup> “My immediate reaction to meeting a man,” she writes, “is invariably to gauge his sexual possibilities” (*Etty*, pp. 72, 123). She refers to some of her past relationships on pp. 283-4.

<sup>36</sup> This is how she describes herself in her first diary entry “I am accomplished in bed, just about seasoned enough I should think to be counted among the better lovers, and love does indeed suit me to perfection, and yet it remains a mere trifle, set apart from what is truly essential, and deep inside me something is still locked away. ... I am blessed enough intellectually to be able to fathom most subjects, to express myself clearly on most things; I seem to be a match for most of life’s problems, and yet deep down something like a tightly wound ball of twine binds me relentlessly, and at times I am nothing more or less than a miserable, frightened creature, despite the clarity with which I can express myself. (*Etty* p. 4) Later she tells us she has a suitcase full of old letters from former lovers (p. 492)

<sup>37</sup> “... seriousness and humour and quick wit” (*Etty*, p. 161). Not, so much, the fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom, she quips, but rather, an “enormously long nap” in the afternoon. (*Etty*, p. 54-55).

<sup>38</sup> “Hush, now. Be patient. And if you cannot say it, then someone else will do it for you, Rilke or Beethoven, for instance” (*Etty*, p. 211)

<sup>39</sup> While some commentators have suggested that Etty was a latent convert to Christianity (Lawrence L. Langer, ‘Understanding Atrocity: Killers and Victims in the Holocaust’ in *Michigan Quarterly Review* 1985 Vol. 24 pp.130-131 and this was indeed how she was received in some Christian quarters (see Ria Van den Brandt, Etty Hillesum and her ‘Catholic

At this stage reposing in herself feels like “being at rest on thistles” (p. 153) and ‘S’ becomes, for her, the emotional focus of her **inner** struggle – a struggle she nevertheless describes as thrilling (p. 39).<sup>41</sup> She is fully aware that she shares the Western ideal of the individual good life: health, growth, wisdom and “learning to stand on one’s own two feet.” (p. 138) and she fears her introspection might merely reflect an over-active ego (p. 152)<sup>42</sup>. But she also acknowledges that compassion for others first requires deep self-understand, self-acceptance (pp. 286-7) and inner clarity (pp. 224, 227).

Her introspection reveals the conflicting forces that pulse through her inner world.<sup>43</sup> “I keep looking for harmony, for synthesis,” she writes, “but I know perfectly well there isn’t any.” So she adds “... the only way to find harmony is to accept all [of] life’s contradictions.” But one must do so with what Rilke in his novel calls a ‘thinking heart’<sup>44</sup> (pp. 116, 126). By accepting things as they come as part of one mighty

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Worshippers’ in Klaas A. D Smelik *et al* (eds.) 2014 *op. cit.*, p. 215 ). Etty clearly identified herself with what she calls “we Jews” or “us Jews” but without adopting Jewish religious practices. Thus, Tina Beattie is correct when she writes, “the Jewishness which overwhelms her existence is something which she observes to some extent as an outsider” (Tina Beattie ‘Etty Hillesum – A Thinking Heart’ in Ursula King (ed). *Spirituality and Society in the New Millennium* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press 2001) p. 251). Having said that, however, in a letter to a friend at Westerbork she asks “... did you pray and fast well yesterday?” (*Etty* p. 568) where yesterday was Yom Kippur. She also compares the Jews at Westerbork with the wilderness experience of the Bible (p. 616) and finds books of the Hebrew Bible comforting and supportive of her inner peace. In particular, the Psalms (*Etty*, p. 656, 657) and Isaiah (*Etty*, p. 635) It should also be noted that, because of jealousy Etty did at one point describe herself as not being a good Christian (*Etty*, p. 95). By this, I think, she meant she did not always have feelings that corresponded to a generally accepted moral standard. Thus, as Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, notes “within her religious individualism her Jewish origins speak clearly ‘The Journey of Etty Hillesum from Eros to Agape’ in Klaas A. D. Smelik *et al* (eds.) *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill 2017) p. 72. It should also be noted that according to Guber (*op. cit.*, pp 291-2) to the extent that Etty does maintain her Jewish identity and the fact that she refers to St Paul as a Jew not only acts as a form of resistance but also means she is no supersessionalist (there is no sense in which the ‘New’ Testament replaces the ‘Old’).

<sup>40</sup> Although, she also noted (four months previously) that, “Nevertheless there is still enough room for one to move and live and be happy and play music and love each other.” (*Etty*, p. 296)

<sup>41</sup> (*Etty*, p. 39) “Where do we stand, S and myself? When one day my mind is clear about this relationship, it will be clear about my relationship with all men and with all mankind, to put it melodramatically” (*Etty*, pp. 69-70 – a more accurate translation than the official one according to Ria van de Brandt, *Etty Hillesum: An Introduction to Her Thought* (ET Harry Monkel Berlin LIT 2014) p. 120)). Her relationship with S leads her to note that, “I am being forged into something else. But into what? I can only be passive, allow it to happen to me. But then I also have the feeling that all the problems of our age and of mankind in general have to be battled out inside my little brain” (*Etty*, p. 93) She tells herself that the remedy to the chaos of her inner conflicts is to “not listen to the outside world but be perfectly still, try letting your innermost being resound and listen to that. ... I must have confidence to hear my inner voice.” (*Etty*, pp. 122-123. Also see pp.417-18) This is a struggle she shares with her diary rather than wears on her sleeve in public display (*Etty*, p. 343).

<sup>42</sup> Sometimes, she admits, “I allow myself to be thrown off course by my own ego ... But I shall keep clearing the path before me, and then walk straight up it.” (p. 419) Elsewhere she is sure that working on herself is not a matter of ego (*Etty*, p. 396).

<sup>43</sup> Between the demand of the body and demand of the soul (*Etty*, pp. 70, 225, 296), between her work at her desk and life in the world (*Etty*, pp. 84, 134, 145, 157, 219, 224), between self-control and letting go (*Etty*, pp. 57, 74-5, 90-91) between dreams and reality (*Etty*, pp. 125-6, 129-30, 140-141) between loyalty to friend and loyalty to family (*Etty*, p. 128) between head and the heart (*Etty*, pp. 77, 86-90, 118-9, 120-121, 145) between the need to look good and the desire not to bother (*Etty*, pp. 104, 124) between reading and doing (*Etty*, pp. 95, 110, 116), reading and writing (*Etty*, p.129, 135, 143, 229) between attention to self and attention to others (*Etty*, pp. 58, 62, 67, 82, 94-95, 122) between levity and seriousness (*Etty*, pp. 67, 75, 83, 86, 93, 104, 223, 225-6, 230) and between sex and tenderness.

<sup>44</sup> See Johannes Wich-Schwarz, *Transformation of Language and Religion in Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: Peter Lang 2012) pp. 63-68. For Wich-Schwarz the ‘thinking heart’ thinks in a new language: one that makes the discovery of the divine possible. By clinging to God the infinite journey toward God is terminated. “God isn’t at all! Don’t you get it?!” says Wich-Schwarz in a dialogue designed to tease out Rilke’s understanding of God in his novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, “Just as language is something ever-evolving, we are creating God all the while.” (on head and heart see *Etty*, pp. 86, 120, 122, 145, 497 515, 543 590 and on Rilkeian transformation see *Etty*, pp. 243, 247, 274-5, 303-4, 336-7, 554)

whole – advice she takes from the American philosopher, William Durant<sup>45</sup> – she learns to come to terms with her various inner moods and everything from the outside world.

As she assigns to its proper place everything that is inside her she begins to construct what she calls her soul-landscape<sup>46</sup> (p. 209) and later following Rilke, her *weltinnenraum* (her outer-world-within<sup>47</sup> p. 276, 515, 637). Prayer<sup>48</sup> (pp. 290, 296, 320, 329, 364, 484, 486, 492, 518) and a compulsion to kneel<sup>49</sup> (26, 103, 106, 109, 148, **181**, 198, 212, 216, 246 (518), 296, 320, 351, 418, 469 509 547), also takes a significant place in her life. Rowan Williams finds this compulsion extremely significant pointing toward a transcendent reality beyond her inner life<sup>50</sup> even if this is often described by her as an inner kneeling (pp. 246, 249-250, 418, 473, 469, **490**, **518**, 531, **536**). “I keep finding myself in prayer. And that is something I shall always be able to do, even in the smallest space: pray” (p. 484). Prayer becomes the portal through which she returns to her outer-world-within “out there [in Westerbork or Poland] I will simply have to carry everything within me ... there will always be enough space to fold two hands in prayer.” (p. 492). Kneeling in prayer<sup>51</sup>, writing the diary, reading Rilke and taking each day as it comes (something she learns from Matthew’s Gospel) all help her to develop and expand her inner world.<sup>52</sup> “The sky within me” she writes, “is as wide as the one stretching above my head.” (pp. 434 also pp. 414, 463, 475-6, 492, 515). Her inner world, which she also describes as “that vessel” (p. 179) and “a great hall” (p. 474) expands to contain “all the reality the day can bring” (p. 492) and from within it she

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<sup>45</sup> Etty quotes from Durant’s book, *The Mansions of Philosophy* a number of times in the early part of diary (*Etty*, p. 23-4. See Fulvio C Manara ‘Philosophy as a Way of Life in the Works of Etty Hillesum’ in Klaas A.D. Smelik *et al* (ed.) *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill 2010 ) pp. 382-387

<sup>46</sup> “Inside me are cornfields growing and ripening” (*Etty*, p. 246). These are the cornfield of the landscape she sees from the train window travelling to Deventer.

<sup>47</sup> Etty sees herself as a Rilkean inner-world builder which is also then to be lived out in the outer world (*Etty*, p. 389 and 497)

<sup>48</sup> “The threat grows ever greater, and terror increases from day to day. I draw prayer round me like a dark protective wall, withdraw inside it as one might into a convent cell and then step outside again, calmer and stronger and more collected again. Withdrawing into the closed cell of prayer is becoming an ever-greater reality for me as well as a necessity. That inner concentration erects high walls around me within which I can find my way back to myself, gather myself together into one whole, away from all distraction. I can imagine times to come when I shall stay on my knees for days on end waiting until the protective walls are strong enough to prevent my going to pieces altogether, my being lost and utterly devastated.” (*Etty*, p. 364 also see p. 509)

<sup>49</sup> She had tried the secular lying down on the floor (*Etty*, p. 38) and the Buddhist sitting which she found too cold (p. 120). At first, her kneeling was limited to the most private room in the house (*Etty*, pp. 124, 164, 239, 320, 518) and was not done without some embarrassment (*Etty*, p. 198)

<sup>50</sup> Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury 2012) pp. 313-325. I am not sure that Williams has this quite right. At one point Etty tells us that what compels her to kneel is the goodness she feels that S generates. (*Etty*, p. 377). This is missed in the English translation which translates the Dutch word *knielen* as ‘cry’ rather than ‘kneel down’. This feeling of being compelled “by something stronger than myself” in prayer (*Etty*, p. 181) also leads Etty to do more mundane actions than pray such as picking up the telephone to tell her patient that she was no longer practicing Chirolgy without first telling S (*Etty*, p. 155)

<sup>51</sup> She finds in prayer and the physical gesture of kneeling (“more intimate even than sex” (p. 148, 547)) the means by which to restore her inner strength. Kneeling at first comes with embarrassment (p. 198) and is limited to the most private room in the house (p. 124, 373) she eventually finds the gesture protective and a physical means of restoring her inner life. As Carol Lee Flinders notes it also showed Etty that she “can be on equally good terms with God and the body” something she had earlier said was difficult (*Etty* p.70) See Carol Lee Flinders, *Enduring Lives: Living Portraits of Women and Faith in Action* (Maryknoll: Orbis 2006) p. 66. On a number of occasions Etty tells us she would like to write a book with the title ‘The Girl who Learned to kneel’ or various version of such a title (pp. 547, 533, 148, 198).

<sup>52</sup> Perhaps this process she describes gives credence to William James’ claim that religion is the “experience of individual men in their solitude.” William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Fount edition 1960) p. 50. On the role of the ‘as if’ to create a practical reality of life see James *Varieties* pp. 70-71.

“find[s] life beautiful and feel[s] free.” (p. 434). By means of her deep acceptance she resists the Nazi terror from within (p. 456).

“What they [the Nazi’s] are after,” she writes, “is our total destruction. I accept it ... and continue to live with the same conviction ... I find life meaningful – yes meaningful –... Living and dying, sorrow and joy, the blisters on my feet and the jasmine behind the house, the persecution, the unspeakable horrors – it is all as one in me, and I accept it all as one mighty whole and begin to grasp it better if only for myself” (p. 462). She then adds, “...I wish I could live for a long time so that one day I may know how to explain it [to others] but if I am not granted my 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?” (462).

Part of what she means by living “a good and faithful life” is immediately made clear in the next few sentences in which she reports the atmosphere of hatred for the Germans which, she says “poisons everyone’s mind” (p. 18) with a desire to hang them all (p. 461). If this is our response she says, “Then those who come after us will be no further ahead and will have to start all over again so why not take just one little step forward ourselves ... through daily practice ..., they [the Germans] are people like ourselves. [we must] shout into the face of all that hatred” (p. 463). “German soldiers suffer as well,” she adds, “There are **no** frontiers between suffering people, and we must pray for them all” (p. 465). She sheds tears for dead soldiers on both sides (p. 179).

This refusal to hate first emerges in the diary in her honest analysis of her feelings toward the nationality of Kathe Fransen, Pa Han’s German cook and ETTY’s housemate (p. 18-21) who she describes as her “second mother” (p. 19). ETTY concludes from her analysis that hatred “is a sickness of the soul”. “Hatred,” she adds, “does not lie in my nature.” (p. 18). To this principle she remains steadfastly faithful throughout her recorded life (even after an encounter with the Gestapo she says “... despite all the suffering and injustice I cannot hate others” (p. 259). It is because she saw the Gestapo officer in his humanness (one in need of treatment) that she was not afraid.<sup>53</sup> As her later description of the SS commander of Westerbork “halfway between a dapper hairdresser’s assistant and a stage-door Johnny” (p. 653) shows, she saw through the uniform to the little man beneath (p. 384). She did not need the prompt of an aging man in a suit in glass box in a Jerusalem court room to articulate the banality of evil.

In a diary entry of March 28<sup>th</sup> 1942 following an air raid during which a house mate had played Bach on the gramophone she gives clear expression of her refusal to hate and her philosophy behind it. She writes:

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<sup>53</sup> “All the appalling things that happen are no mysterious threat from afar, but arise from fellow beings very close to us. That makes these happenings more familiar, then, and not so frightening. ... I felt very strongly that morning that you cannot take your hate out on individuals, no one person is to blame” (ETTY, p.259).



There must be so many houses all over the world that are collapsing each day under just such bombs as these ... And yet I felt so deeply peaceful and grateful, there in my bed ... resigned to all the disasters and pains that might be in store for me. And I firmly believed that I would go on finding life beautiful, always, despite everything. All disasters stem from us. Why is there a war? Perhaps because now and then I might be inclined to snap at my neighbour. Because I and my neighbour and everyone else do not have enough love. Yet we could fight war and all its excrescences by releasing each day, the love that is shackled inside us and giving it a chance to live. And I believe that I will never be able to hate any human being for his so-called wickedness, that I shall only hate the evil that is within me, though hate is perhaps putting it too strongly even then. In any case, we cannot be lax enough in what we demand of others and strict enough in what we demand of ourselves. And I believe the reason why I am not frightened at times like these is because everything that happens is so close to me, because it originates – no matter what monstrous dimensions it may sometimes assume – from humankind, and thus time and again is reduced to human dimensions. And that is why so many events do not fill me with fear, because I keep thinking that they originate in man, in each individual, in myself, which makes everything understandable and ensures that deeds never degenerate into monstrously inhuman misdeeds. (p. 307)

Although these last words require much more reflection given the systematic production of mass death she would later be caught up in the direction of her argument is clear. Later, in the same entry she adds:

Do not relieve your feelings through hatred ... avenged on all German mothers, for they too sorrow at this very moment for their slain ... sons. Give sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due, for if everyone bears his grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate ... [if you don't but] ... instead reserve most of the space inside you for hatred and thoughts of revenge ... then sorrow will never cease. ... If you give sorrow the space it demands, then you may truly say life is beautiful and so rich ... that it makes you want to believe in God." (pp. 307, 308-9 also see p. 245, 343)

Finding space for sorrow, destruction, depression, suffering and death<sup>54</sup> and accepting them as part of life (p. 469) she concludes is the only way to retain meaning.<sup>55</sup> "It sounds paradoxical," she writes, [but] by excluding death from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into life we enlarge and enrich it" (p. 464). Acceptance, though, "does not", she writes, "exclude deep moral indignation"<sup>56</sup> at the way the regime treats human beings (pp. 397, 487, 491) – Etty gives expression to such indignation against the SS in her letters from Westerbork, against the Gestapo and collaborators in Amsterdam, and against the Jewish Council.<sup>57</sup> "But", she writes, "genuine moral indignation ... must not be petty personal hatred [that would make it merely an excuse] for keeping alive personal hurts." (pp. 358-9

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<sup>54</sup> "By 'coming to terms with life' I mean the reality of death has become a definite part of my life; my life has, so to speak, been extended by death, by my looking death in the eye and accepting it, by accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability." (*Etty*, p. 464 also see pp. 456, 466, 470, 487)

<sup>55</sup> "Life is beautiful and meaningful too. It is meaningful even in its meaninglessness, provided one makes room in one's life for everything, and accepts life as one indivisible whole, for then one becomes whole in oneself. But as soon as one tries to exclude certain parts of life, refusing to accept them and arrogantly opting for this and not for that part of life, yes, then it does become meaningless because it is no longer a whole, and everything then becomes quite arbitrary" (*Etty* p. 466).

<sup>56</sup> She quotes the American missionary E Stanley Jones saying "deep indignation resists evil" (*Etty*, p. 397). In the passage Stanley Jones mentions Jesus and Nietzsche as promoters of righteous anger (*Etty*, pp. 397-8).

<sup>57</sup> "Why can't people grasp that acceptance does not exclude deep moral indignation and downright militancy" (*Etty* p. 491). Etty displays this deep moral indignation on a number of occasions. In her letters from Westerbork, Etty expresses her indignation against what the Nazi's were doing especially in her letter of 24<sup>th</sup> August. While she says she felt no indignation against the Gestapo officer who shouted at her she does express some nonetheless. Such people should never be given power over others. They need treatment and concern for their well-being but without this their role should be terminated (*Etty*, p. 259). She expresses indignation against collaborators (*Etty* p. 363) but like the Gestapo officer she puts their actions down

Etty also occasionally expresses disgust with herself when she slips into temporary depression (pp. 142, 157, 389, 418-9) which she calls her 'pauses' (pp. 62-64, 93, 465). These are times when her robust inner life temporarily collapses and needs to be dug out again. The last words of her diary are often quoted as being "We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds."<sup>58</sup> But in fact at the bottom of the last page she had written in capital letters: "One must acknowledge one's pauses." (p. 550). Our pauses are part of life too: there is no balm unless we accept them and this makes her a gentle self-critic. One particular pause worthy of note occurs while she briefly works as a typist in the Amsterdam office of the Jewish Council – a position she took, exempting her from call up to Westerbork, on the advice of her brother and perhaps as a compromise with those who would sooner see her go into hiding.<sup>59</sup>

Sometimes I feel as if a layer of ashes were being sprinkled over my heart, as if my face were withering and decaying before my very eyes, as if everything were falling apart in front of me and my heart were letting everything go. But these are brief moments, then everything falls back into place. ... For once you have begun to walk with God, you need only keep on walking with [h]im and all of life becomes one long stroll – such a marvellous feeling (p. 491)

Later in the same entry she adds:

We go too far in fearing for our unhappy bodies, while our forgotten spirit shrivels ... [then] ... we conduct ourselves without dignity. We lack the historical sense, forget that even those about to perish are part of history. I hate nobody. I am not embittered. And once the love of mankind has germinated in you, it will grow without measure (pp. 491-492)

'S' had encouraged Etty to regard her fear that her inner life is possessive rather than creative as a good sign presaging "an inkling of the divine". (p. 14). He tells her that the source of her required transformation was to be found within.<sup>60</sup> The more she listens to her 'more truly human self' (p.220) –

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to failed relationships and petty spite that could be treated with love. It is not people that are bad "for no one is really 'bad' deep down" (*Etty* p. 529) rather, "all the blame must be put on the system that uses such people – what needs eradicating is the evil in man, not man himself. ... All the appalling things that happen ... arise from fellow beings very close to us. That makes these happenings more familiar... and not so frightening. The terrifying thing is that systems grow too big for men and hold them in a satanic grip, the builders no less than the victims of the system." (*Etty* p. 259). Here we face a common responsibility "to destroy in ourselves all we think should be destroyed in others" (*Etty* pp. 529 and 245). If everyone were to do that the system we live under might just be a little more hospitable (*Etty* 63, 375, 471, 523). She also expresses indignation at the 'chaotic madhouse' that is the Jewish Council. She recognises its mistakes (*Etty* p. 573). Like those who go into hiding (*Etty* p. 523) members of the Jewish Council hope to save themselves from a fate they should be willing to share. They cling to their hiding places and the office of the Jewish Council like driftwood in the vain hope of saving themselves when in fact all they do is shelter ever great fears and hatreds within themselves (*Etty* pp. 483-4, 486-88, 491-496). Of the Jewish Council Etty wrote, "Nothing can ever atone for the fact, of course, that one section of the Jewish population is helping to transport the majority out of the country. History will pass judgement in due course." (*Etty* p. 511). However, there is no need for individuals to sit in judgement because she writes, "every 'sin' against mankind will be avenged, in man himself and in the world outside." (*Etty* p. 535 and 28). "After the war" she notes, "two torrents will be unleashed on the world: a torrent of loving-kindness and a torrent of hatred. And I know I should take the field against hatred" (*Etty* p. 526).

<sup>58</sup> See for example, Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, 'The Journey of Etty Hillesum from Eros to Agape' in Klaas A. D. Smelik *et al* (eds.) *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill 2017) pp. 80-81

<sup>59</sup> "They keep telling me that someone like me has the duty to go into hiding because I have so many things to do in life, so much to give. But I know that whatever I may have to give to others, I can give no matter where I am, here in the circle of my friends or over there, in a concentration camp. (*Etty* p. 487) An attempt by Klaas Smelik was made in February 1943 to kidnap her and force her into hiding but she resisted (p. 761). A further attempt was made at Westerbork by Werner Sterzenback but she turned this down too (p. 756). Etty said she did not even want to keep her exemption papers (p. 541). Etty was indignant with herself at having joined the office of the Jewish Council in Amsterdam at one stage she even 'plays truant' work with a pretend dental appointment (pp. 491, 509, 511) so it is something of a relief for her that she is given the opportunity volunteers to join the committee of social welfare for those on transit to Westerbork which takes her to the concentration camp.

<sup>60</sup> "Strength comes from within," she tells herself, "from a small closed in centre, into which I sometimes withdraw" (p. 30).

she uses the German word ('hin-eyn-horshen') *hineinhorchen* (p. 319 e.g p. 120 inner listening or harkening) – the more her inner world grows (p. 51). It is, she says “**as if** there were a photographic plate inside me everything, is sharply outlined inside me” (p. 484). It is not egoism (p. 198, 424) “not morbid individualism to work on oneself” she writes, “True peace will come only when every individual finds peace within himself; when we have all vanquished and transformed our hatred for our fellow human beings of whatever race – even into love one day, although perhaps that is asking too much. It is, however, the only solution.” (pp. 434, 535). Her inner life is the front on which she fights the war (pp. 63, 491, 523) – transforming hatred and bitterness in the outside world into love and peace inside her.<sup>61</sup> From there it overflows into her public life as a sharing with others for others. We inflict punishment on ourselves unnecessarily, she claims, when we fail to love.<sup>62</sup> Her inner possessiveness has been re-imagined and transformed into an inner hospitality (pp. 63, 281-2, 286-7, 290, 296, 300, 314, 375, 471, 490, 523)

### Going out to Others

On 7<sup>th</sup> January 1942 almost a year into her relationship with ‘S’ with whom she is now on intimate kissing terms (p. 221) she writes, “He is certainly educating me in a love embracing more than just one person. ... Yet sometimes I feel the temptation of wanting to own him”<sup>63</sup> (p. 221). Now his secretary<sup>64</sup> (p. 330) and no longer his patient she develops an intense love for ‘S’ (p. 226, 419) which partly due to his wondering hands<sup>65</sup> and his dubious therapeutic method of wrestling with his female patients<sup>66</sup> (pp. 6-7, 12, 15, 37, 45, 267, 334) and partly due to Etty’s own sexual inquisitiveness<sup>67</sup> developed into a physical relationship. There was talk of a marriage of convince (pp. 155, 279, 355-60, 382) to give ‘S’ a half Dutch status to avoid his extradition or to shepherd him through transit together and a brief scheme to pretend Etty’s mother was Aryan (pp. 510, 742) that comes to nothing. After their sexual encounter (p. 361) she continues to convince herself of her earlier conviction that she has enough love for both Han and ‘S’<sup>68</sup> (pp. 229-230) and that ‘S’ remained faithful to Hertha and she to Han (pp. 168, 206, 332).

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<sup>61</sup> I think it is partly this that explains her refusal to go into hiding. She writes, “I want to be there right in the thick of what people call horror and still be able to say life is beautiful” ( p. 545).

<sup>62</sup> “... every sin against love of mankind will be avenged, in man himself and in the outside world” (p. 535). In this context, she also notes that having inner or outer worries is a denial of God for which insomnia becomes a self-imposed divine punishment (*Etty*, p. 541)

<sup>63</sup> Six month later she will write, “My whole being has become one great prayer for him [S]. And why not for all the others a well?” (*Etty*, p. 475)

<sup>64</sup> Etty started to train as a chirotherapist but felt compelled to abandoned Chirotherapy and cancelled her own patients (*Etty*, p. 153-6)

<sup>65</sup> “His hand and caresses exude a tenderness that comes from the soul not from the body” (*Etty* p. 417)

<sup>66</sup> “a funny way of treating patients you have, you get your pleasure out of it and you get paid for it as well even if it is just a pittance” (*Etty* p. 45)

<sup>67</sup> “Just when he gives me all the passion and tenderness he can muster, I make purely physical demands, want his spiritual passion to spread into his body and his body to become mine. Here my fantasies starts, and with them my tale of woe.” (*Etty* p. 417)

<sup>68</sup> In the same entry she records her night of sex with S she says of Pa Han “he too has become substance of my substance.” (*Etty* p. 360) Earlier she had asked herself: “My two grey-haired friends. What is it with me? (*Etty*, p. 249) Later she will regard possessive faithfulness as a throwback to be eradicated in favour of a universal love less erotic and more agapistic in nature (*Etty*, pp. 451, 302-304)

Six weeks later, though, she admits, “I don’t really want his sexuality [ET: sensuality]; I want his tenderness [but] I have [that] all the time.” (p.418)

This realisation follows an hour’s meditation after which she writes “You must never turn a person, no matter how beloved, into the object of your life.”<sup>69</sup>

From her emotional entanglements with S she comes to formulate the positive counterpoint to her refusal to hate what she calls “a higher love”<sup>70</sup> (p. 161): a love for all humanity including the un-loveable ‘so called’ enemy.<sup>71</sup> (p. 308-9, 331, 348-9, 451, 466, 521, 530, 539, 541) – a stage beyond Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, she says, to a love encompassing every Thou. (p. 167)

To pass from the arms of one man [S] into the arms of the other [Han]? What sort of a life am I leading? Last night ... I poured out ... all the tenderness one cannot express for a man even when one loves him very, very much. I poured it all out into the great ... spring night. I stood on the little bridge and looked across the water: I melted into the landscape and offered all my tenderness up to the sky and the stars and the water and to the little bridge. And that was the best moment of the day. And I felt this was the only way of transforming all the many and deep and tender feelings one carries for another into deeds: to entrust them to nature, to let them stream out under the open spring sky, and to realise that there is no other way of letting them go. And that is how my day should have ended.” (p. 345 also pp. 348-9)

Her love for S and Han grows into a “thousand small tendernesses” such as “finding the right words for people in need” (p. 348). Her tenderness is “not just for one man” she writes, “but for so many of God’s creatures which also have a right to our attention and love”<sup>72</sup> (p. 349 also pp. 82-3, 123, 134, 167, 254, 255, 302-4, 331, 475, 483, 553). Or, as she says Rilke puts it, “love not face to face but side by side.” (p. 249). The particular love-object is less important than the direction and quality of love (p. 358). Later, after she is accused of **not** living in the real world with these ideas she writes:

All over the real world men and women are being kept apart. ... Why not turn the love that cannot be bestowed on another, or on the other sex, into a force that benefits the whole community and that might still be love? And if we attempt that transformation, are we not standing on the solid ground of the real world. (p. 525)

By volunteering for the ‘Social Welfare of People on Transit to Westerbork’<sup>73</sup> she not only breaks free from both S and Han<sup>74</sup> (p. 511) but also finds the outlet to express her higher love.<sup>75</sup> Her thousand

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<sup>69</sup> After this meditation she does what earlier she had said she dare not do, to “let go of the old traditional view of the body’s role in love [by which she means sexuality]” p. 418 – this is the counterpart to what she says about the kneeling body in prayer (p. 70, 148, 547). Note here also the mediator metaphor. S mediate both life and God for Etty (cf *Etty*, pp. 417-18, 516) “The aim is life itself in all its forms And every person is a mediator between you and life ... from every person we learn about life in a different form [there is a mutual learning between people and life but then] we have to let them go again and return them to life, no matter how hard we may find that [this is so for those we love most] love block[s] our outlook on life ... only when it turns the beloved into an end.” (pp. 417-8). The idea that the ‘love object’ is a means to a higher love, less possessive and more altruistic and universal, had been inculcated in her by S (*Etty*, p. 82-3 also pp. 303-4, 123, 451).

<sup>70</sup> The influence of Rilke is present here too (*Etty*, pp. 281, 304).

<sup>71</sup> Prefiguring Martin Luther King’s comment about loving but not necessary liking everyone Etty writes, “I have so much love. I love a few good friends but that love is not a fence erected against others; my love is far-flung, all embracing and broad enough to include very many of whom I am really not all that fond.” (*Etty*, p. 254) “I want to fraternize with all my so-called enemies.” (*Etty*, p. 541).

<sup>72</sup> “I can do without a man. Is it because I have always had so many of them round me?”

<sup>73</sup> Etty refused attempts to force her into hiding. She felt that she had to share the common fate of her people and hoped to be able to chronicle it for future times. But as a compromise, with those who would have her hide, in mid-July she took a job as a

gestures of love and tenderness toward others will be, as she put it, a matter “bonds without bondage” (p. 241). On her first return from Westerbork after the death of S, she writes echoing the word of the person she calls elsewhere (p. 591), the Jew, Paul: “I have so much love in me ... for Germans and Dutchman, Jew and Gentile, for all of mankind – there is more than enough to go round.” (p. 569). The love and peace we build in ourselves she says is love and peace we can reflect back into the world<sup>76</sup> (pp. 535-6). With this attitude she returned to Westerbork for the last time. In a letter from there she wrote, “It is the only way one can live nowadays. With unreserved love for one’s tortured fellow creatures, no matter of what nation, race or creed ... [so] ... I ... go on living ... with a good deal of zest and joy and conviction and an inkling of all the connections there are and that ultimately still makes life a meaningful whole.” (p. 629) And, to Han and her other former housemates in Amsterdam she writes:

Accepting your own doom needs inner struggle. ... ‘And yet God is love’ – I completely agree, and this is truer now than ever ... several suicides last night before the transport. ... The realms of the soul and the spirit are so spacious and unending that this little bit of physical discomfort and suffering really doesn’t matter all that much. I do not feel I have been robbed of my freedom; essentially no one can do me any harm at all. ... Yes, children that’s how it is, I am in a strange state of mournful contentment. ... Now I am going to jump in at the deep end again. I’m off to the hospital ... [barracks] ... I shall find many empty beds there after this transport. (p. 611)

Her letters from the camp reveal that she lived out her tears of compassion and gratitude. She suffers with dignity (pp. 453, 459) refusing the status of de-humanised and humiliated victim (p. 434-5) without succumbing to bitterness or hatred and she encouraged others to share her sense of self-worth and thereby attain human self-redemption against despair and hopelessness – to refuse to inflict further injury on ourselves as she puts it by “our feelings of being persecuted, humiliated and oppressed [and] [b]y our own hatred” (p. 434).<sup>77</sup> Supported by a poem and a prayer her faith offered hope in a hopeless situation where hope is most needed and made possible both an impossible refusal to hate and an impossible

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typist in the Office of the Jewish Council who oversaw the deportation of Dutch Jews. This exempted her from transportation to Westerbork. She regretted the decision, felt guilty about what the council was doing and did not want to stay in post. She felt everyone there saw their job as driftwood to hold onto for the purposes of their own survival but this was at expense of the lives of others (*Etty*, p 491). So when the opportunity arose, two weeks into the job, she volunteered to join the ‘Committee of Social Welfare of People on Transit to Westerbork’ which took her to the concentration camp. Although still on the staff of the Jewish Council she felt she was in a better position to offer practical help to her fellow sufferers. Her status meant she was able to leave the camp and moved to and fro between there and Amsterdam from August to December 1942. Illness meant that she did not return to her Westerbork until early June 1943 and again refused offers of hiding places. In late June 1943 she chose to remain in Westerbork (rather than return to Amsterdam) and, as a consequence, she was no longer able to leave. This choice was largely due to the fact that her parents and Mischa, were now at Westerbork too.

<sup>74</sup> She says she took her leave of S at Westerbork (“on Dreathe Heath”) (*Etty*, p. 564) but her recognition of the need to do so had taken place much earlier (*Etty* pp. 154-5)

<sup>75</sup> Breaking free of S is something she craved as much as being with him (pp. 154-5, 351, 353, 359, 370, 418-9, 464, 511). She decides to break with S by carry him within her inner world (*Etty*, p. 281).

<sup>76</sup> If anything, her experience at Westerbork strengthened these convictions. “It has been brought home forcibly to me here how every atom of hatred we added to the world makes it an even more inhospitable place. And I also believe, childishly perhaps but stubbornly, that the earth will become more habitable again only through the love that the Jew Paul described to the citizens of Corinth in the thirteenth chapter of his first letter.” (*Etty*, pp. 590-91). She also writes, “... that among the barracks, full of hunted and persecuted people, I found confirmation of my love of life. ... There is simply one great meaningful whole.” (*Etty*, p. 527)

<sup>77</sup> On this see Rachel Feldhay Brenner, ‘Ety Hillesum: A Portrait of a Holocaust Artist’ in Hillesum’ in Klaas A.D. Smelik *et al* (ed.) *Spirituality in the Writings of Ety Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill 2010 ) pp. 235-251 esp. pp. 244-5.

willingness to love.<sup>78</sup> Twice in the diaries, and drawn from personal experience, she gives us a possible title, “half plagiarised”, she says, from Nietzsche of a future work of philosophy, perhaps, she might have written: ‘*Beyond Love and Hate*’ (pp. 378, 444).

At Westerbork she recognised that, “For us, I think it is no longer a question of living, but of how one is equipped for one’s extinction.” (631) In her next letter a week later – for, by then she, could send them only intermittently – she reveals her cheerfulness at the sight of a rainbow.<sup>79</sup> (p. 631) Five days before her own departure to Auschwitz in a letter to Maria Tuinzing with whom she had left her diaries in safe-keeping and possible publication after the war she writes:

“We have become marked by suffering for a whole lifetime. **And yet** life in its unfathomable depths is so wonderfully good, Maria – I have to come back to that time and again. And if we just care enough, God is in safe hands with us despite everything ... (Etty pp. 657-8). She ends this letter by asking<sup>80</sup> Maria to “give Käthe a cheerful look,” to “press your check to Pa Han’s for me” and to give her love “to my dear desk” on which she had written her diary “the best place on earth.” She says.

### **Etty’s God**

And God is not accountable to us for the senseless harm we cause one another, we are accountable to [h]im. (p. 456 also see p. 455, 481, 488-9)

What did Etty mean when she spoke of God? This is a key question in the secondary literature<sup>81</sup> which I have not got time to review but which would be part of an extended lecture. I will simply say that my title alludes to a work by John D Caputo, ‘*The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*’ which itself refers to Derrida’s own reading of St Augustine in his quasi-autobiographical work *Cirumfessions*. Out of that matrix, particularly as worked out by Caputo in his book, *The Insistence of God*, we find, I believe, the best way to interpret Etty’s theology – or rather, that Etty’s writings display what Caputo calls the insistence of God coming to existence in us.

Before presenting Etty’s account of God I should, perhaps, express a hesitation that I have not sufficiently paid my respects to those caught up in the Shoah by pausing at least to raise this need as a

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<sup>78</sup> In this she may be said to exemplify many features of Derridean ethics.

<sup>79</sup> But feeling the need to protect others from this reason for her cheerfulness she tells them it is down to hearing rumours of peace on its way.

<sup>80</sup> Maria – I myself fail to measure up in every way, of course. I can’t cope with the many people who want to involve me in their affairs; I am often much too tired. Please give Käthe a cheerful look from me – and press your check to Pa Han’s for me too? ... And please will you give my love to my dear desk, the best place on earth.” (Etty pp. 657-8)

<sup>81</sup> See for example, Tina Beattie, ‘Etty Hillesum: A Thinking Heart in a Darkened World’ in Ursula King (ed.) *Spirituality and Society in the New Millennium* (Brighton: Sussex University Press 2001) pp. 247-258. Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury 2012) pp. 313-325. Denise De Costa, *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: Inscribing Spirituality and Sexuality* (ET Mischa F. C. Hoyinck and Robert E. Chesal New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1998). Ulrich Beck, *A God of One’s Own: Religion’s Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence* (ET Rodney Livingstone Cambridge: Polity Press 2010) pp. 1-18. Various articles by Klass A. D Smelik and Alexandra Pleshoyano especially those in Klass A.D. Smelik *et al Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill 2010) and well as the various debates in Klass A.D. Smelik *et al The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill 2017) particularly in relation to the discussion of the views of Helen Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Hans Jonas on Etty Hillesum. Various texts by Richard Kearney also draw on Hillesum in the construction of his theology and in his book *Turn of Phrase* Don Cupitt also adds his opinion on her work.

question. I intend to do so in a longer version of this talk<sup>82</sup>. I also ought to apologise for leaving out so many other themes found in Etty's diary.<sup>83</sup>

Etty's God: first, we cannot overlook the influence on Etty of God found in Rilke's verse. This God is far from the God of theism. Rilke's God is deeply vulnerable. His is a still maturing God. Only with the artists help, Rilke claims, can God become.<sup>84</sup> In *The Book of Hours*, (a text Etty loved) Rilke says that the God of modern theism is "too big and unwieldy for use"<sup>85</sup> instead the monk in the poem "wish[es] to be amidst the wrath of time / preparing you a dwelling place ...."<sup>86</sup> According to Rilke, God has never lived in lofty heights but washes within where all life resides<sup>87</sup> so that when we become silent and listen, our deeds express our care for God's wellbeing.<sup>88</sup> In this care we become with God, being, as we become, a "watchful guard within God's vast orchard ... of bearing fruit for God"<sup>89</sup> guarding God's name and keeping it safe by pouring God's lost song back into God.<sup>90</sup> When Etty talks of helping God by providing a dwelling place for God in herself it is at least partly Rilke's God she has in mind.

I shall never burden my today with cares about tomorrow, although that takes some practice. ... I shall try to help [y]ou, God, to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that [y]ou cannot help us, that we must help [y]ou to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of [y]ou, God, in ourselves. And perhaps, in others as well. Alas, there doesn't seem to be much [y]ou [y]ourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold [y]ou responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help [y]ou and defend [y]our dwelling place inside us to the last. (pp. 488-489)

A second major influence on her understanding of God is Carl Jung (a point highlighted by Don Cupitt). After Rilke, Jung is the most quoted figure in her diary.<sup>91</sup> One passage she quotes in the diary she repeats in a letter, "...God had moved inside me to the space in which he still resides," she writes, then she adds ... "now I shall ... quote ... C. G. Jung. 'So experienced 'god' too is a theory in the literal sense, a way

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<sup>82</sup> I would suggest that Jacques Derrida's notion of the cinder allows us to respect the claim that nothing positive can come from the holocaust without denying Etty Hillesum's right to question that claim. She writes, "If we abandon the hard facts that we are forced to face ... if we do not allow them to settle and change into impulses through which we can grow and from which we can draw meaning – then we are not a viable generation." She adds if we want to offer something to post-war world "[n]ew thoughts will have to radiate outward from the camps themselves, new insights, spreading lucidly, will have to cross the barbed wire." (*Etty*, pp. 586-7). This claim comes from the site of the cinder – "(what remains without remaining from the holocaust, from all burning)". See Jacques Derrida, *Cinders* (ET Ned Lukacher Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2014 edition) p. 25.

<sup>83</sup> For example, Etty's feminism before feminism, her idea of suffering, her thinking on abortion, her role and activity at Westerbork, her writing plans, her embryonic philosophy of language and her sense of existential freedom. There are also the ever widening fields of comparative and interdisciplinary studies that centre on her work. Of particular interest is her resistance to adopting a non-thinking living deadness which Primo Levi's identities with the concept of the 'musselmans' and Giorgio Agamben calls 'bare life'.

<sup>84</sup> See translators introduction in Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Book of Hours: Prayers to a Lowly God* (ET Annemarie S Kidder Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2001) pp. xv-xx.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, p. 191

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, p. 181. And pp 231-2

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, p. 93

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 210-1, 214-16

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, p. 218

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, p. 219-220 and 95

<sup>91</sup> "Jung and Rilke will go with me [to Westerbork]" she says. (*Etty*, p. 508).

of looking at the world, an image which the limited human mind creates in order to express an unfathomable and ineffable experience. The experience alone is real”<sup>92</sup> (p. 557):

A complete account of those who influenced her understanding of God should not exclude her Christian friend Henny Tideman<sup>93</sup> and, of course S from both she caught the gesture of kneeling in prayer not typical of Jews (pp. 106, 198, 547) and *pace* Williams, from S, the compulsion to do so. (pp. 26, 377 – a point missed in the English translation where ‘cry’ replaces ‘kneel’)

Encouraged by S to regard her inner centre from which she attains her strength as the divine, Etty expresses the task of her spiritual hygiene this way:

There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there too. But more often stones and dirt block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then he must be dug out again.<sup>94</sup> (p.91)

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<sup>92</sup> Perhaps she is drawing on imagery from her aborted pregnancy in this letter in full it reads: “And once God had moved inside me to the space in which he still resides, well, I suddenly stopped having headaches and stomach aches. And now I shall again quote someone else’s words, this time C. G. Jung. “So experienced ‘god’ too is a theory in the literal sense, a way of looking at the world, an image which the limited human mind creates in order to express an unfathomable and ineffable experience. The experience alone is real”

<sup>93</sup> Henny Tideman (1907-1989) (called Tide) had known Spier since 1939. She called him her Mercedes (Etty, pp. 97, 567) because she found comparing him to a car amusing but also because of the “contraction of the words ‘*merci*’ and ‘*Dieu*’ (Etty, p. 693) (thanks be to God). Etty came into contact with her through him and they became good friends. She was a Christian and follower of Frank Buckman’s revivalist movement. She encouraged Etty to attend an act of Christian worship and after Etty reacted, “No! Never again.” (Etty, p. 320). Tideman’s brand of Christianity emphasised four main principles: love, selflessness, honesty and purity. Etty picked up from Tide the practice of silent prayer for a short period each day. During that time (which, for Etty, was first thing in the morning for half an hour) Tide would listen to God and she regarded her thoughts during this time as divinely inspired. (Etty, p. 696) Etty shared with Tide a notebook of quotations which they compiled together (See Ria Van den Brandt, ‘Newly Discovered Sources of Etty Hillesum in Klaas A. D. Smelik *et al* (eds.) *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill 2017) pp. 300-1). Etty, later wrote in a letter to Tide, “I say it quite openly: ‘God’. You have taught me to say it like that every moment of the day and the night; you and our Friend [S]” (Etty, p. 566). However, in the privacy of her diary she explicitly says that it is the faith of S not that of Tide that she hoped would rub off on her. (Etty, p. 120) Tide’s faith was too childlike: too simple for her. As Denise De Costa notes, Etty had to make room for both faith and an intellectual quest (see Denise De Costa, *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: Inscribing Spirituality and Sexuality* (ET Mischa F. C. Hoyinck and Robert E. Chesal New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1998) p. 217.). Etty recognised that her intellectual quest often blocked the way of the self-expression she wanted to flow from her inner creative sources and she craved Tide’s simple faith but knew it was not in her make-up. Without putting the intellectual quest aside (Etty, p. 122) she decided, like Tide, to listen to herself and seek “a little piece of eternity in myself” (Etty, p. 120). She tells herself to put books aside, at least for a small portion of the day, and “redirect your ears and your senses to your inner centre ... and try to find peace in yourself again.” (Etty, p. 120) The difference between Etty and Tide on God emerges when Tide replies to Etty’s question about marriage. Tide says, “God has never sent me a man” (Etty, p. 122). In her reflection on this Etty asks herself if she should adopt this criteria and if she did, she says, she would probably never marry (Etty, p. 123). Instead, she would listen honestly to her inner voice and this would tell her if a ‘man had been sent by God’. In the same diary entry she makes it clear that what Tide means by ‘discerning what God sends’ she means ‘discerning her inner voice’: “My inner voice must be my sole guide to everything” (Etty, p. 123). She may have a happy marriage in the future but this will be due to fate - whatever comes and this is how she interprets Tide’s “if God send me a man” (Etty, p. 124). Indeed, Etty will later take her own advice in relation to Klaas Smelik her inner voice tells her he is not the man for me and she turns down his suggestion of sex. (Etty, p. 283) Etty admits to be irritated at times by Tide’s use of ‘God’. (Etty, p. 206) However, reference to Rilke reminds her that any such use of ‘God’ as Tide’s is of value: “You delight in all who use you as an instrument” (Etty, p. 207). One might also compare the role God plays in the prayers of Etty and Tide following the death of Spier (cf Etty, p. 515-7 with 744). If Tide and Etty did not mean exactly the same thing when they used the word ‘God’ (Etty always using the lower case *jau*, *je* or *jij* (you) and Tide the upper case *U* (Thou) (p. 744)) they did share a desire for periods of silence in each day and Etty’s silent prayer (and daily Bible reading (Etty, p. 330)) was heavily influenced by Tide’s practice (Etty, p. 265; also see De Costa op. cit. p. 218). Etty also develops, alongside Tide, (Etty, p. 474) the conviction that “gratitude will always be greater than sorrow” (Etty, p. 567) and, as from S, Etty also picked up from Tide the habit of kneeling in prayer (Etty, pp. 106, 198).

<sup>94</sup> Much later she will identify these stones and dirt as, “ties to father and mother, youthful memories, dreams, guilt feelings [and] inferiority complexes.” (Etty, p. 520)



Two weeks earlier she had defined what she means by ‘God’ – a definition she persists with. Summarising in her diary a letter she had written to S (pp. 494, 519) she writes, “I regained contact with myself, with the deepest and best in me, which I call God, and so also with you.” The God that dwells within her is merged with her inner self but also communes with what is deepest and best in others. Perhaps she has in mind Jung’s collective unconscious which she calls a “communal reservoir” (p. 222) or, she says, “the divine, call it what you will” (p. 222). With an allusion to Exodus<sup>95</sup> she also describes herself as “an old god wrapped in a cloud [from our mythology] a cloud of my own thoughts and feelings ... and I felt so warm and protected and safe.” (p. 90.)<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, possibly because of “the critical, rational atheistic bit that is part of me as well” (p. 103) she **had** found the prospect of speaking the name of God and believing it ‘haunting’. (p. 225) But on 9<sup>th</sup> January 1942 she commits to her diary the following prayer:

God, I thank [y]ou for having given me so much strength: the inner centre regulating my life is becoming stronger and more pivotal all the time. My many conflicting outside impressions now get on wonderfully well with one another. My inner space is able to encompass more and more, and the many conflicts no longer deprive one another of life. ... I think I work well with [y]ou, God, that we work well together. I have assigned an ever larger dwelling space to [y]ou, and I am also beginning to become faithful to [y]ou. I hardly ever have to deny [y]ou any more. Nor ... deny my own inner life any longer out of a sense of shame. The powerful centre spreads its rays to the outermost boundaries. I am no longer ashamed of my deeper moments. .... There is no conflict in me any longer, Rilke and Marlene Dietrich tolerate each other, as it were, wonderfully well in me. ... I thank [y]ou God, peace and quiet now reign in my inner Domain thanks to the strong central authority [y]ou asset. The furthest flung boundaries sense [y]our authority and [y]our love and allow themselves to be guided by [y]ou (p. 223)

Six weeks before this prayer she had noted how her compassion moves her to tears (p. 161) and speaks of her “inexpressible love” for people and for “what I call God”<sup>97</sup> (p. 161) and then reports her ‘ambivalence’ (p161) about what others in S’s circle call God “They seem far too ponderous and emphatic with their ‘love’ of their God” (p.161). This ambivalence is repeated after her one-and-only experience of Christian worship.<sup>98</sup> (p. 320). Nevertheless, in a letter<sup>99</sup> following the death of S<sup>100</sup>, she credits him for, “The great work he has done on me: he dug up God in me and brought [h]im to life, and I shall now go on digging and seeking God in all the human hearts I meet.” Referring to S she continues he is “so much part of my heaven ... arching above me that no matter where in the world I am, I have

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<sup>95</sup> Ex. 13: 21-22; Ex. 40: 34-38; Num. 12: 5.

<sup>96</sup> This does not come across in the English edition where ‘*oude god*’ is twice mistranslated as old Jew. See Etty Hillesum, *The complete Works 1941-1943 Bilingual, Annotated and Unabridged Vol 1* p. 145-6

<sup>97</sup> In November 1941 Etty wrote “I have two great feelings deep inside: [i] love, an inexpressible love, which perhaps cannot be analysed because it is so primitive, for creatures, and God or for what I call God; and [ii] compassion, a boundless-compassion that can sometimes cause tears to spring to my eyes.” (p. 161).

<sup>98</sup> Her experience of Christian worship left her with ‘some distaste’ too ‘pious’ and ‘exhibitionist’ in its ‘public love-making with God’. “No! Never again,” she exclaimed, “Perhaps it’s alright just once, for the experience.” (p. 320)

<sup>99</sup> In this letter she refers to ‘S’ as Juls (p. 640) suggesting that ‘S’ is what she calls him in the privacy of her diary not in her public life suggesting that the writing in the diary and the actual biography might not always coincide. On this see Klaas A. D. Smelik, ‘Etty Hillesum and her God’ in Klaas A.D. Smelik, *et al* (ed.) *Spirituality in the writings of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill 2010 ) pp 75-76.

<sup>100</sup> From lung cancer on the very day he was called to Westerbork.

only to lift up my eyes to have him with me.” (p. 567). This is a passage she repeats in her diary with even greater praise for S.<sup>101</sup>

Indeed, much of the last of her 10 existing diary books can be read as a eulogy for ‘S’: a paean to God that merges with a paean to ‘S’<sup>102</sup> such that it is not clear whether she addresses her praise to God or to ‘S’<sup>103</sup> – both seem to hover over the camp in her letters (p. 640). Etty says of ‘S’ after his death “I carry on what is immortal in you.” (p. 536 also see p. 507). To God she says, “the best and most noblest part of my friend, of the man whose light [y]ou kindled in me, is now with [y]ou.” But later, having given further voice to her grief, she adds “But it is really the other way round: heaven lives in me. Everything lives in me.” (p. 515)

Etty tells us that “withdrawing into the closed cell of prayer” allows her to erect “high walls around” her “within which I can find my way back to myself, gather myself together into one whole away from all distraction.” (p. 364) But who is she addressing in her prayers?: this woman who can write “my brain, my capable brain, tells me that there are no absolutes, that everything is relative, endlessly diverse, and in eternal motion, and that it is precisely for that reason that life is so exciting and fascinating, but also so very, very painful.” This woman who writes that there is no such thing in life as ‘once and for all;’ (p. 107) who has read too much of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard to have any metaphysical pretence in her address to God. This woman who writes “the truth” in inverted commas and says that every worldview will crumble because of the little lie they all contain but that we need a worldview nonetheless; (p. 159) who can write, perhaps with a nod to Wittgenstein,<sup>104</sup> that “there simply isn’t anything beyond all there is” (p. 19) and tell us, in words that might have been spoken by Richard Rorty, “I do not believe in objective statements. [What] there [is] is an unending combination of human interaction” (p. 535). Who is the lower case ‘you’ of her prayers?

A number of candidates have been suggested: her inner self-transcending self, found in others too, (the view of Oliver Davis),<sup>105</sup> Jung’s collective unconscious (the view of Tjeu van den Berk)<sup>106</sup>, ‘S’ her

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<sup>101</sup> “My heart will always fly to you like a bird, from any place on earth, and I will surely find you ... that piece of heaven would still spread out within me and my heart would fly up to it like a bird and that is why everything is so ... terribly simple and beautiful and full of meaning.” (Etty p. 510)

<sup>102</sup> Also see p. 313 for another paean to S.

<sup>103</sup> Carrying both God and S within her she writes, “I feel a growing need to speak to [y]ou alone. I love people so terribly, because in every human being I love something of [y]ou.” (Etty p. 514) Is this ‘you’ S (her nameless name) or God? Of S she says, “I want to carry you in me, nameless and pass you on with a new and tender gesture I did not know before” p. 517 (the gesture of prayer) and in the light of her wrestling with S she quotes Rilke (Etty p. 547). At one point the goodness she feels that S generates makes her want to kneel in prayer (Etty, p 377 – also see Etty, p. 495). This is missed in the English translation which translates the Dutch word *knielen* as ‘cry’ rather than ‘kneel down’. After the death of S she says that she and God have been left one their own (Etty, pp. 516, 545) and that S had mediated between her and God (Etty pp. 516, 540). “I Carry on what is immortal in you” (Etty, p. 534) she says and before his death “I carry you within me like an unborn baby, though rather than in my belly I carry you in my heart, which is a more respectable place anyway.” (Etty, p. 490 also see p. 226).

<sup>104</sup> “The world is all that is the case” says Wittgenstein in the opening section of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922 ET David Pears and B. F. McGuinness London: Routledge 1961 edition) p. 5.

<sup>105</sup> Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmann 2001)

<sup>106</sup> Tjeu van den Berk (1938) is a Dutch theologian and Jung scholar, and an authority on the historical impact of Jung in the Netherlands. In his book, *In de Ban van Jung. Nederlanders Ontdekken de Analytische Psychologie* (*Under the Spell of Jung*,

nameless name divinised within her (the suggestion of Helene Cixous)<sup>107</sup> a transcendent deity<sup>108</sup> (suggested by Rowan Williams and Tina Beattie),<sup>109</sup> her own innermost self (suggested by Don Cupitt

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*The Discovery of Analytical Psychology by the Dutch*) (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2014) he positions Etty Hillesum not only as a follower of Jung, 'her main inspiration after Rilke', but also as the only one who really lived out Jung's ideas, of all Dutch followers (p. 242). In January 1942 Etty is developing a love beyond what she calls materialism. On January 8th she writes: "How childish and petty and utterly 'materialistic' I was just a year ago, and how little true love there was in me" (*Etty*, p. 222). Then on 9th she declares that while the material world (heaven and earth) exist "matter must not be the final object" (*Etty*, p.222). There immediately follows a reflection on Jung's who she is reading at the time (*Etty*, pp. 213 and 227) and his notion of the collective unconscious; an inner "communal reservoir" she calls it which we should be grateful we can draw upon. She expresses her gratitude that "by chance" she has been "chosen" to mediate it into words, or, as she puts it, "find a way of giving words to the spirit, the divine, call it what you will." (*Etty*, p. 222).

<sup>107</sup> Denise De Costa reports that in a series of seminars conducted in the 1980's Helene Cixous developed the view that "Hillesum experienced Spier and God as one" (Quoted in Denise De Costa, Denise De Costa, Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: Inscripting Spirituality and Sexuality (ET Mischa F. C. Hoyinck and Robert E. Chesal New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1998), p. 223). That S, for Etty, is God's initial, his first name and that Etty's spiritual growth is marked by the history of this 'S. God' "first name S and last name God" (*ibid.*, pp. 222-3). In the first part of the diary S dominates but Etty symbolically kills S to mark room for the God part of 'S. God' exclusively an event finalised in the death of S but which had been sign-posted from the very beginning because of (i) their 28 year age difference, (ii) the fact that he was already engaged (iii) that Etty's heart was not fully involved with the idea of marriage to him (*Etty*, p. 511), (iv) their historical circumstance and (v) the fact that, while Etty was grateful to S for all he had done for her, she recognised from very early on in the diary her need break free from him and stand on her own feet. (*Etty*, pp. 154-5, 351, 353, 359, 370, 418-9, 464, 511) The way she would do this is to internalise him (*Etty*, p. 281). She uses S to attain a higher freedom (*Etty*, p. 82-3). Summarising Cixous's view De Costa writes:

Hillesum felt the need for someone in her conscience whom she could talk to, someone present deep within her, S had been the pillar, the buttress supporting the dialogue she would now have to conduct with God. Cixous believes that Hillesum's longing for God can be interpreted as a desire to marry God. .. This could perhaps explain Hillesum's fantasies of marrying S, of S being the centre of her dream. (De Costa op, cit., p. p. 223)

Cixous points to Etty's joy at the death of S. For me, this joy is not about the space it creates in her for God but a deep thankfulness that S would not have to go through suffering at Westerbork and Poland. Cixous also rightly mentions that that S remains nameless in the diary matching the Jewish tradition of not naming God. However, in a number of letters he is named (*Etty*, pp. 553 (Schip-e-arr) 562, 567 (Jul)) suggesting that 'S' is only her private diary nameless name for Spier.

<sup>108</sup> When Etty speaks of transcendence she means by it two things (i) the higher love beyond sexual love (*Etty*, p 255, 391) and (ii) the eternal as found in Rilke. She quotes Rilke's 'Letter to a Young Poet' as follows:

"Everything is bearing and then giving birth. Allowing every impression and every germ of a feeling to reach perfection deep within us, in the dark, in the ineffable, the unconscious, in what is beyond the grasp of reason, and to wait the hour of birth of a new clarity with deep humility and patience: only thus can you live artistically – in understanding no less than in art."

"There is no measuring of time then, a year does not matter then and ten years are as nothing. Being an artist means not calculating and counting: coming to maturity like a tree which does not force its sap, which continues to stand confident throughout the spring storms, never doubting that summer will come. It will. But it comes only to the patient, who behave as if eternity lay before them, so carefree, still and spacious are they. Every day I keep learning it, learning it painfully, for which I am grateful: patience is all." (*Etty*, p. 243)

She quotes or refers to this passage many times and also writes it in her book of quotations. Later she quotes Rilke to the effect that to be truly creative one requires time to forget events; to allow them to seep into you and then, with patience, words will come (*Etty*, p. 522)

In Rilke's poetry ripening, maturing and even maternity are symbols for transcendence. Etty though refused maternity "The mother instinct," she writes, "is something of which I am completely devoid." (*Etty*, p. 164) However, as Denise De Costa points out, Luce Irigaray has argued that there are more ways of being maternal than physical motherhood. Irigaray writes:

"We also need to discover and declare that we are always mothers just by being women. We bring many things into the world apart from children: love, desire, language, art, social things, political things, but this kind of creativity has been forbidden to us for centuries. We must take this material creative dimension that is our birthright as women." (Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993) Quoted in: Denise De Costa, *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: Inscripting Spirituality and Sexuality* (ET Mischa F. C. Hoyinck and Robert E. Chesal New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1998) p. 235).

Etty's feeling that there is creativity growing inside is her maternity: she prefers to give birth to words (*Etty*, pp. 174, 330, 341). Rilkean transcendence ripens for Etty into universal love. However, her love is earthed in the here and now. She agrees with Rilke's rejection of Christ's preference for heavenly things over earthly things (John. 3: 12). We must use the earthly things we are given even in times of suffering. "St Francis' song to the sun is more glorious than the cross." (*Etty*, p. 543) Etty is happy to quote Rilke on projection and this fits her reference to Jung. "We project images within us, we take every opportunity to be world builders, we erect thing upon thing round our innermost being." (*Etty*, p. 387) Etty was not granted the time to write in the new language of the 'thinking heart' but she may have found solace in Rilke's claim that the eternal dead remain forever part of life.

and Denise De Costa)<sup>110</sup> and, perhaps, somewhere in the mix, the aborted product of her womb who she also directly addresses as ‘you’ (cf. pp. 168-9 with p. 471) and which provides her with a consistent metaphor of what is coming to birth within her (pp. 167, 174, 210, 246, **330**, 433, 471, 481, **490**, 497, 498).<sup>111</sup> I wonder if there might not be a bit of truth in all these suggestions.<sup>112</sup>

Two weeks before she volunteers for Westerbork, Etty repeats her earlier definition of ‘God’

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

On her return to Amsterdam, on leave from Westerbork, and after the death of ‘S’ she again reverts to this unique definition of God.

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

She then immediately takes up the Rilkean theme of ‘living *as if* in eternity’ she explains, it is: “**As if** I were lying in [y]our arms, oh God, so protected and sheltered and steeped in eternity. **As if** every breath I take were filled with it and **as if** my smallest acts and words had a deeper source and a deeper meaning”(p. 519)

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<sup>109</sup> Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury 2012) pp. 313-325. Tina Beattie ‘Etty Hillesum: A Thinking Heart in a Darkened World’ in Ursula King (ed) *Spirituality and Society in the New Millennium* (Brighton: Sussex University Press 2001) p. 257.

<sup>110</sup> Denise De Costa, *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: Inscripting Spirituality and Sexuality* (ET Mischa F. C. Hoyinck and Robert E. Chesal New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1998).pp.216, 219 224-226. De Costa argues that, “Etty Hillesum’s God was born the very moment Etty chose to be herself” (De Costa, *ibid.*, p. 226) She identifies this point as 25<sup>th</sup> Nov 1941 (*Etty*, pp. 154-5). Ulrich Beck, *A God of One’s Own: Religion’s Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence* (ET Rodney Livingstone Cambridge: Polity Press 2010) pp. 1-18. Don Cupitt, Don Cupitt, *Turns of Phrase: Radical Theology A-Z* (London SCM Press 2011)

<sup>111</sup> Hans Jonas. has argued that something new of God came to birth in Etty Hillesum: an impotent and vulnerable God of love who needs help from, and shelter in, us and for whom we need to take responsibility. For Jonas, Hillesum shows such a God can, and did, inspire faith in the context of the worst human beings do to each other. Hans Jonas ‘Matter, Mind and Creation: Cosmological Evidence and Cosmogonic Speculation’ in Lawrence Vogel (ed.) *Morality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1996) pp. 165-197 quoted in Meins G. S. Coetsier, ‘Etty Hillesum’s Ethical Consciousness and the History of Jewish Philosophy’ in Klaas A. D. Smelik *et al* (ed.) *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill 2017) pp. 43-46. For Luce Irigaray, according to Denise De Costa, we only experience ourselves as human over against other animals by reference to God – not a transcendent being but the horizon of our becoming. Ludwig Feuerbach brought to consciousness how this is done but mistook exclusively male characteristics for human nature and so excluded women from the divine. What is now needed is the addition of the female in the divine projection. Irigaray writes:

God forces us to do nothing except become. The only task, the only obligation laid upon us is: to become divine men and women, to become perfectly, to refuse to allow parts of ourselves to shrivel and die that have the potential for growth and fulfilment. (Luce Irigaray, *Sex and Genealogies* p. 68-9 quoted in De Costa *op. cit.*, p. 228)

This is not only a sentiment Etty shared (*Etty*, pp. 491-2) it is also, according to De Costa, something she helped to provide. In his account of Irigaray’s theology, Fergus Kerr sees no possible way the necessary female divine self-image can be conjured up without a good deal of self-conscious projection that would render the divine image an idol and so an inappropriate focus of prayer and worship (Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity* (London: SPCK 1997) pp. 110-112). According to De Costa, Etty Hillesum provides the female divine self-image. By reflecting “a God deep within herself, who is consistent with her own dreams and thoughts” (De Costa, *op. cit.*, p. 228) a link was made between her “becoming human and her becoming divine” (De Costa, *ibid.*, p. 230) in Irigaray’s sense of ‘the horizon of accomplishment’ in which “having a God and becoming one’s gender go hand in hand” (Irigaray, *Sex and Genealogies* p. 67). In this way Etty Hillesum does what Fergus Kerr thought impossible.

<sup>112</sup> My own view which I only have time to hint at here, but hope to develop later, is that the best way to understand Etty’s account of God is to read her alongside the work of John D Caputo in particular his book, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2013)

She wanted to help everyone find God in their heart. “Everyone must be turned into a dwelling dedicated to [y]ou, oh God” **and she continues** “I promise [y]ou, yes, I promise that I shall try to find a dwelling and a refuge for [y]ou in as many houses as **possible.**” (pp. 519-520) She then quotes Rilke “... the gods ... are nowhere safe except in our heart”<sup>113</sup> The deepest and best in herself and the deepest and best in others merge into her understanding of God.

My life is one long hearkening unto myself and unto others, unto God. And if I say that I hearken, it is really, God who hearkens inside me. The most essential and the deepest in me hearkening unto the most essential and deepest in the other. God to God. (p. 519)

On the three occasions Etty explicitly defines what she means by God (pp. 83, 494, 519) we are left in little doubt that, for her, ‘God’ labels that which is deepest and best in herself (and in others). All the uses of ‘God’ scatted on the power point slides can be interpreted in this way and this is confirmed by other things she says when talking about God. For example, she equates her faith in God with her faith in her inner receptiveness (p. 437) and she describes being true to God as being true to one’s own better moments (p. 122-3, 536). She equates God with her inner sources: (p. 535) “that little piece of eternity in myself” (p. 120) that with the help of Rilke (p. 337) and S (p. 332) she has built and can renew in herself time and again.<sup>114</sup> And when things do go wrong temporarily it is, she writes, “as if your inner light switch has been turned off or, let us put it boldly, as if God had deserted you for a moment.”<sup>115</sup> (p. 216)

When she speaks of “feeling safe in God’s arms” she admits she is speaking rhetorically of her inner freedom and feeling of security<sup>116</sup> (p. 487, 489, 490-91, 494) and she can equally speak of being safe and protected in the arms of life (p. 386).

When she does make a distinction between God and herself, ‘God’ becomes a cipher for fate: “Oh God, to bear the suffering you have imposed on me and not just the suffering I have chosen myself.” (p. 538)

She does not worry about her personal fate focussing only on the moment ‘sufficient unto today’ (488, 498, 535, 537, 631). Indeed, she positively embraces her fate as a Nietzschean *amor fati* (p. 154, 478, 487, 494, 508-9, 520): “I accept everything from [y]our hands oh God as it comes.”<sup>117</sup> (p. 515) In one of

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<sup>113</sup> Rilke source – not found

<sup>114</sup> Etty writes “I think what weakens people most is fear of wasting their strength. If after a long and arduous process, day in, day out, you manage to come to grips with your inner sources, with God, in short, and if you only make certain that your path to God is unblocked – which you can do by ‘working on yourself’ – then you can keep renewing yourself at these inner sources and need never again be afraid of wasting your strength” (Etty, p. 535 also see p. 331 and her reference to need for inner preparation which other often lack p. 494) What also blocks God are our many inner and out worries. Then insomnia follows and a feeling living a worthless life become self-imposed divine punishments (Etty, p. 541)

<sup>115</sup> It is as if God vanishes, she says, when the sunny cornfields of one’s inner plain vanish. (Etty, p. 68) She also expresses the view, which she later amend, that aiming for a healthy body makes it easier “to provide decent shelter for a portion of life and suffering and God” easier “to offer God hospitality.” (Etty, p. 564) Later she will not place such conditions on God: (Etty, p. 533) “Even if I am not healthy life goes on” (Etty, p. 533)

<sup>116</sup> “I no longer plumb the depths of despair. My sad moments become a springboard. In the past I used to think that I would always be sad, but now I know that those moments too are part of life’s ebb and flow and that all is well.” (Etty, p. 225). Her faith in God is a sign for her of an inner confidence that, when seen as a whole, all is well: life is beautiful and meaningful despite her pauses.

<sup>117</sup> Accepting everything, including her fate as part of the Jewish community, means, for her, “bowing to the inevitable” (Etty p. 487) and not refusing to shoulder the responsibility for continuing to affirm that life is good and beautiful despite it all (Etty, p. 545) She accepts that there will be no help coming immediately from the outside world and so nothing that God can do to

her more important theological interventions in the mode fate as a cypher for God, which would take a paper in itself to unpack, she writes:

This slice of the epoch in which we live is something I can bear, that I can shoulder without collapsing under its heavy weight, and I can already forgive God for allowing things to be as they probably must be. To have enough love in oneself to be able to forgive God!!

Personifying both her fate and the flow of her inner life as “rolling out of God’s hand” (p. 9, 125) she holds dialogues with God (pp. 223, 384, 494, 515, 587, 640), offers to help God (p. 484-5) by finding a dwelling place for God in herself and in others<sup>118</sup> and thanks God all the while<sup>119</sup> for the smallest of everyday things (p. 474, 488, 495, 499, 520-1) and does so consistently with the way she personifies her desk, her lamp, books, trees, the moon, the stars, the new week (p. 226) and her aborted foetus as dialogue partners.<sup>120</sup>

Rowan Williams thinks that if this is all there is to Etty’s God she is just “another selective modern” and we must “let her go”<sup>121</sup> However, we do not need to deny a humanist reading of her dialogue with God – the deepest and best in her – in order to see ‘something more’ is going on in what she calls her courage to speak God’s name without embarrassment (pp. 181, 516, 532) in prayer. So what *is* going on here?

“There are days,” writes Rilke, “when I cannot talk about myself without talking about God, this lowly God, in whose shadow my words grow dark and sparkle.”<sup>122</sup> ‘Something more’ going on in prayer is also noted by Jacques Derrida who writes, “In every prayer there must be an address to the other as other, for example – I will say this for the risk of shocking – God. ... [F]or the pure prayer demands only that the other hear it, be the other.”<sup>123</sup> In Caputo’s terms this other, this ‘something more’, insists when Etty speaks the name of God even if that which was astir within her, which went by God’s name also went,

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save her (Etty, p. 488) rather she must save herself by saving God (Etty, p. 488) by offering God hospitality and gifts of flowers (Etty, 488-9) this active faith in God within her allows her “to cope with any situation” (Etty, p. 490) and she equates her inner confidence not with personal well-being but with a sense of surrender to the way things must unwind as things come (Etty, pp. 490-491) but with no loss of indignation. “I am in God’s hands” she writes, “... what will be will be” (Etty, p. 494) “I simply cannot make active [external] preparation to save myself” (Etty, p. 491) It is in this context of an inner trust and acceptance of her fate that we should read passages like “And isn’t it true that one can pray anywhere ... on this earth where God, in these troubled times, feels like casting his likeness” (Etty, p. 586). She also equates Tide’s ‘God sending a man to marry’ with ‘if it comes.’ (Etty pp. 123-4) That said, however, she is convinced that “we shape our own fate from within” (Etty p. 258) how we bear our fate is down to our own inner preparation. And, in this sense, she must account not only for what God intend with her but we she intends with God: “At difficult moments like these [thinking of her growing friendship with Joop Vleeschhouwer in the context of the death of S] I often wonder what [y]ou intend with me, oh God, and therefore what I intend with [y]ou.” (Etty, p. 531)

<sup>118</sup> Finding a dwelling place for God she calls a witty, perhaps facetious (*grappig*) metaphor and calls on Rilke to help her out quoting Rilke as saying, “For truly, even the greatness of the gods depend upon their need: no matter what house we keep for them, they are nowhere safe except in our hearts” (Etty, p. 520)

<sup>119</sup> She thanks God for dwelling within her (Etty, p. 439)

<sup>120</sup> For an excellent account of Etty’s use of metaphor and personifying language see Marja Clement, ‘*Hineinhorchen* and Writing: The Language Use of Etty Hillesum’ in Klass A.D. Smelik *et al* (eds.) *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context: Writing, Life and Influences of a Visionary Author* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2018) pp. 51-77 esp. pp. 57-67.

<sup>121</sup> “...let her go as an apostle of communal religion.” Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury 2012) p. 323

<sup>122</sup> Quoted in Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Book of Hours: Prayers to a Lowly God* (ET Annemarie S Kidder Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2001) pp. xix. According to Susan Guber (*op. cit.*, p. 298), a line from Rilke which Etty quotes summarises her attitude to prayer: “Strangely I heard a stranger say: I am with you.” (Etty, p. 47).

<sup>123</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Psyche: Interventions of the Other in Howard Coward and Toby Foshay (eds.) *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press 1992) p. 110

for her, by other names too: life,<sup>124</sup> silence,<sup>125</sup> and her inner creative sources.<sup>126</sup> Who among us really knows, after all, of what it is we speak when we speak God's name? Something insists for Etty in God's

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<sup>124</sup> Despite the many horrors of the Nazi occupation some of which Etty lists in her diary entry of May 30th 1942 (*Etty* p. 386) she writes, "And yet – at unguarded moments, when left to myself, I suddenly lie against the naked breast of life, and her arms around me are so gentle and so protective, and my own heartbeat is difficult to describe: so slow and so regular and so soft, almost muffled, but so constant, as if it would never stop, and so good and merciful as well – That is my attitude to life, and I believe that neither war nor any other senseless human atrocity will ever be able change it" (*Etty*, p. 386). This reference to 'the arms of life' matches her later references to feeling safe in God's arms (*Etty*, p. 487). She can love life because God dwells within her (*Etty*, pp. 226, 480-1, 487, 640) She blames neither life (*Etty*, p. 439) nor God (*Etty*, 455, 456, 480, 488) for the times she lives in and mentions God and life in the same thought as though the equivalence between the two were obvious (*Etty*, p. 483, 491). Like God (*Etty*, p. 515) life has its mysteries (*Etty*, pp. 386, 645) to which she often feels close. She takes everything as it comes from God's hands (*Etty*, p. 515) and takes life as it comes (*Etty*, p. 622). Knowing with conviction that life goes on despite everything (*Etty*, pp. 76, 245, 341, 533) is equivalent in her mind to finding inner peace without forgetting God (*Etty*, p. 44) and she can talk of keeping in touch with God and keeping in touch with life (*Etty*, pp. 49, 340). Life is, she writes, "a magnificent and compelling adventure" (*Etty*, p. 447) and God is another name for that adventure (*Etty*, p. 439-440). We belong to life (*Etty*, p. 418) and we belong in God's arms (*Etty*, p. 494). S mediates both life (*Etty*, p. 553) and God (*Etty*, 516) and Etty equates reposing in her love of life with reposing in the deepest and richest part of herself which she calls 'God' (*Etty*, p. 519) which is something she re-affirms in the same letter in which she describes her tears merging into her prayers (*Etty*, p. 640). She feels as responsible for shepherding life within her through these troubled times (*Etty*, p. 493) as she does for shepherding God (*Etty*, p. 488). Just as life must be lived to the full (*Etty*, pp. 39, 44, 156, 508, 537) so faith in God must be total (*Etty*, p. 498). And, Etty expresses her gratitude to life (*Etty*, pp. 147, 254, 567) as she does to God (*Etty*, p. 262, 499, 515, 519). Indeed, at one point, she turns her gratitude to life into poetry that touches on the pagan. She writes, "I am so grateful for this life ... Han is sleeping upstairs ... and I am creeping gratefully into my narrow, solitary bed. Curious, whenever I lie there stretched out on my back, I feel just like as if I were clinging to Mother Earth herself, though I am actually lying on my soft mattress. But as I lie there like that, intense and outstretched and full of gratitude for everything, it is just as if I were at one with – well with what? With the earth, with the sky, with God, with everything" And truly, it does feel as if I were clinging to the earth herself and not to a ...decadent mattress. And now good night." (*Etty*, p. 254).

<sup>125</sup> As well as finding a dwelling place for God within her Etty also sought the patience to grow an inner silence (*Etty*, p. 245) so that her poetic voice might emerge as if through clear water from her inner creative sources (*Etty*, p. 125) which she regarded as being part of God. (*Etty*, p. 181) Often, she says, she deluded herself in the past that she was harkening to her inner self (maybe referring to a diary entry on 7th October 1941 (*Etty*, p. 125) but now (20th February 1942) after a period during which she neither wrote nor prayed (there was only one diary entry in almost a month since 24th January) she writes, "I stopped saying my prayers ... because I genuinely kept praying inside." (*Etty*, 244) Loving being alone in bed for once she recognises how much her inner life has grown during this silent period "inside me are cornfields, growing and ripening" (p. 246) Perhaps recalling the events of 5th- 8th December she quotes Rilke, "Everything is bearing and then giving birth" ... "and to await the hour of birth of a new clarity with deep humility and patience" (*Etty*, p. 246) This is a passage from Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* which she had quoted more completely 4 days earlier with its emphasis on the artist waiting patiently as if they had eternity before them for words to come from "deep within us, in the dark, in the ineffable, the unconscious, in what is beyond the grasp of reason" (*Etty*, p. 243) Etty, had learnt from her Christian friend Henny Tideman to maintain a time of silence in the day in which she could be alone in order to listen to her inner self. Tide called this 'listening to God' (*Etty*, p. 696) and Etty followed this convention but, for Etty, this also meant listening to what was emerging from the silent ineffable dark within; to her slowly ripening creative sources. Early morning was Etty's preferred half hour for this (*Etty*, p. 178) but she also tried to find space for it "between two deep breaths or in a five minute chat." (*Etty*, p. 310). Despite a busy life "one must always carry a great silence within one; a silence into which one can always withdraw even in the midst of all the hustle and bustle and ... animated conversation." (*Etty*, p. 310) Three month later on 5th July 1942 she writes: "For a whole year now I have been working at the quiet space within me, so that it now expands into a great hall, palpably present." (*Etty*, p. 474) This inner silence which she builds within her and can retreat into sounds like the cell of prayer which she builds around her (*Etty*, p. 509) in which she does her inner kneeling. (*Etty*, pp. 518, 536) As an act of resistance she pledges to "preserve my lifestyle come what may" and this means reading short stories and finding "an hour for myself" and being true to herself in this way she takes as being equivalent to being "faithful to [y]ou [God] through thick and thin." (*Etty*, p. 497). This growing inner calm is easily equated "with a faith in God that has grown so quickly inside me that it frightened me at first but has now become inseparable from me. And now to work: First some Jung." (*Etty*, p. 481) She sees this growing silence within her as the space in which her inner sources might grow (*Etty*, p. 331) into poetry if she has enough patience. (*Etty*, p. 311) "Hush now." she write, "Be patient. And if you cannot say it, then someone else will do it for you, Rilke or Beethoven, for instance." (*Etty*, p. 211) Sometimes she feels ready to bust from the silence into creative productiveness "I have been struck by the feeling these last few days that I'll be getting up in the middle of the night sometime soon to write a book. A feeling of being pregnant, mentally pregnant, and wanting to bring something into the world at long last." (*Etty*, p. 330) It is against the background of this silence that she will compose "stories about these times that will be faint brushstrokes against a wordless background of God, life, Death, suffering and Eternity." (*Etty*, p. 483) However, silence on its own "will not do" for that would be just another escape into a system. (*Etty*, p. 484) Being as "wordless as the growing corn or the falling rain" in order to simply be (*Etty*, p. 483) is only the first step to finding the right words against a wordless background. (pp. 394, 483) As

name and Etty responds to this instance of God by bringing God into existence in a new and challenging form that ultimately proves, for her to be life sustaining: “You dwell deep within me God I love this life” (p. 226) she writes, and then immediately quotes Jung on God.<sup>127</sup>

We do not know what Etty wrote about Meister Eckhart (those diaries were burnt) but we do know, from recently discovered letters, that what spare time she had at Westerbork was spent “fully immersed” in reading him. (New bilingual edition of the diaries Vol. 2. p. 1110) Perhaps, this is why in her letters from the camp God appears more subtly distinct from her inner self.<sup>128</sup> (pp. 628, 631, 633, 640, 656)

At Westerbork Etty quotes a woman’s despairing of God “I keep calling, Oh God, Oh God – but does he really exist.” (p. 600) This woman’s idea of an interventionist God who may or may not exist is not Etty’s God. If your idea of God fills you with despair, fear or thoughts of revenge then you should take your leave of such a God. As Etty says in the diary, “Faith in God ... [means] to go on finding life so beautiful.” (p. 459) Yet, Etty does show she understands the despair that lies behind this woman’s

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she says, “There is a vast silence in me that continues to grow. ... And in the silence new powers of expression must grow” (Etty, p. 503)

<sup>126</sup> Etty’s creative inner sources grow in the silence within her and, she says, are part of God. (Etty, p. 181) God is there in her inner well (Etty, p. 91) from which the clear water of poetics words might be drawn. (Etty, 510, 512-3) When Etty asks God for a sign she means a sign of her own creative self-expression. (Etty, pp. 153-4) “I only want to try to be true to that in me which seeks to fulfil its promise.” (Etty, p. 154) She wants to master her inner creative sources (Etty, p. 331) but recognises that this will come only with the patience and inner truthfulness of which Rilke spoke. (p. 311) She writes, “why did [y]ou not make me a poet, oh God? But perhaps [y]ou did, so I shall wait patiently until the words have grown inside me, the words that proclaim how good and beautiful it is to live in [y]our world, oh God, despite everything we human beings do to one another.” (Etty, p. 515) She describes her struggle with her poetic sources as words that come only after a storm (Etty, p. 174) or like bringing up treasure from a sunken fleet of ships. (Etty, p. 531) Her future writing about the Shoah will be “a bloody battle of words fighting and struggling with each other.” (Etty, p. 523) When she says “Perhaps one day God will give me the few simple words I need” (Etty, p. 527) she means that with Rilkean patience that lasts an eternity she may find deep within her the words she needs. She wants to live in both the dream world of the poet and the grey everyday world and reconcile them (Etty, p. 126 and 179). Patience and struggle fight within her as Titans forge a new world in a workshop deep within her (Etty, p. 537). She thanks God for her gifts, “You have given me the gift of reading, are [y]ou also willing to give me the gift of writing? But,” she adds, “I’m always fighting myself, my other-----” (Etty, p. 544) She chides herself for not being able to finish her sentences. Her other what? What is her other? Is her other the patience she needs to wait on the silence for the words to come? Is her other her creative sources which are part of God with which her patience struggles? She does tell us she has found a new faith “faith in my talent. It is no longer enough to live for the day something more has to be added” (Etty, p. 537) Working with her own powers she prays that they continue to grow into poetry “Give me a small line of verse from time to time. oh God” (Etty, p. 532) and after saying she would declare it verbally to God’s heaven if she had no paper to write on she repeats the petition (Etty, p. 532). Later, after she develops her declaration of herself as Rilke’s ‘thinking heart’ – the thinking heart of the barracks: the thinking heart of the whole concentration camp (Etty, pp. 515, 543) she says she will go to ‘God’s till’ “and exchange all that heavy, jingling small change I carry for a single blank banknote” (Etty, p. 542) by which, she explains, she means exchange lots of small worries for one great inner peace. Then after a thought for her parents and a reminder that the impending destruction of herself and the fellow sufferers must be borne with grace, she declares “There is no hidden poet in me, just a piece of God that might grow into poetry” (Etty, p. 542) From Westerbork she writes of her life as “one long sequence of inner miracles” (Etty, p. 640) in which her “creative powers are translated into inner dialogue with [y]ou [God].” (Etty, p. 640) She may never be the great poet she would like to be, she says, and even if she manages to give small outer expression of her feeling of inner creative sources just one word will have to suffice to say it all “God” (Etty, 640).

<sup>127</sup> A quote she writes out more completely three weeks later in a letter; perhaps drawing on imagery from her aborted pregnancy she writes in this letter: “And once God had moved inside me to the space in which he still resides, well, I suddenly stopped having headaches and stomach aches.” ... [Then she quotes Jung] ... “god’ too is a theory in the literal sense, a way of looking at the world, an image which the limited human mind creates in order to express an unfathomable and ineffable experience. The experience alone is real” (Etty, p. 557):

<sup>128</sup> Although, a month after this letter in which she reports reading Eckhart she still repeats her unique definition of God in her diary but adds, ““My life is one long hearkening unto myself and unto others, unto God. And if I say that I hearken, it is really, God who hearkens inside me. The most essential and the deepest in me hearkening unto the most essential and deepest in the other. God to God.” (Etty, p. 519)



comments<sup>129</sup> for she asks, “isn’t it almost ungodly [godless] to keep on having such faith in God in times like these?” (p. 459) The very thought that it is godless to still have faith in God establishes a tension that moves in the direction of Eckhart’s God beyond God:<sup>130</sup> a God who keeps insisting; and does so, for Etty, in the beauty of Jasmine (pp. 459-460, 489) the delicate fragility of a yellow tea rose<sup>131</sup> (p. 422), the glorious magnificence of life (p. 616), her compassionate love for other people (635), her refusal to hate (p. 616), her inner creative sources (p. 515) and humanities essential goodness (p. 529). These constitute her faith in God:<sup>132</sup> (p. 497) “I believe in God and I believe in man, and I say so without embarrassment.” (p. 434) To this faith she surrenders herself completely (p. 498) “if we have faith at all then we must have faith all the time.” (p. 498) She then adds:

I feel responsible for all that great and beautiful feeling for life I carry within me, and I must try to shepherd it safe and sound through these times, toward better ones. ... There are moments when I feel like giving up ... but I soon rally again and do my duty as I see it, to keep the spark of life inside me ablaze – and now some Rilke. (p. 498)

Following her pledge to shelter the beautiful feeling of life the next day, she prays “it is truly difficult to carry [y]ou intact with me and to remain faithful to [y]ou through everything as I have always promised (p. 498). A week later, two days before departing for Westerbork, she contemplates suicide but soon puts that thought aside “there must be someone” she writes, “to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness.” (p. 506) She pledges **not** to become numb in the concentration camp but to be her own passionate self (pp. 506, 603). “I must not give up no matter how hard the day ... try to bear it and try to save a little piece of God” (p. 506) To do this in the concentration camp “what matters is to raise God’s banner high above the thousand fears and oppressions and despondencies of life.” (p. 507)

Summarising to herself what she has learnt from ‘S’ she writes:

It means gathering together all the strength one can, living one’s life with God and in God and having God dwell within.” (p. 439)

Then, as if not to be misunderstood, she says in parenthesis “(I find the word ‘God’ so primitive at times, it is only a metaphor after all, an approach to our greatest and most continuous inner adventure. I’m sure I don’t even need the word ‘God’ ... a makeshift construction).” (p. 439-440) Outside the parenthesis she continues, “[W]hen I sometimes have the inclination to speak to God ... it is ... as if I were **addressing** something in myself to plead with a part of myself. (440)

Despite this claim not to need the word ‘God’, at Westerbork she writes in one of her letters that her faith “end[s] up with just one single word: ‘God’. And that says everything and there is no need for anything more”. (p. 640).

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<sup>129</sup> When Etty writes as a journalist rather than a poet in her August 24<sup>th</sup> letter she asks, “God Almighty, what are [y]ou doing to us? The words just escape me.” (p. 647)

<sup>130</sup> We must forget words like ‘God’ and just be, she says (*Etty*, p. 483, 488)

<sup>131</sup> Nature and God come together for her in flowers (*Etty*, p. 330) and she sees eternity in a pebble (*Etty*, p. 445).

<sup>132</sup> Which also represents the faith in herself she was looking for (*Etty*, pp. 79, 156) “a new faith” she says, in her own talents (*Etty*, p. 537)

Caputo would say that what is going on in the name of God in Etty Hillesum is an insistence where “we ourselves are called upon to supply God’s existence”<sup>133</sup> God insists it is up to us to ensure that God’s insistence lives by providing God with a dwelling place in us. “The name of God,” Caputo adds, “is the name of a summons by which we are visited, not of a super Being whose help we occasionally require to get us out of a jam.”<sup>134</sup>

If Etty can be said to have a theology Caputo’s, forged in years of debate with Derrida, for me, come closest to it. Hillesum and Caputo should be read in tandem. “The name of God” Caputo writes, “is the name of an insistent call or solicitation that is visited upon the world, and whether God comes to exist depends upon whether we resist or assist this insistence.”<sup>135</sup> In what couldn’t be a more succinct description of Etty’s theological position Caputo writes, “God needs us to be God and we need God to be human.”<sup>136</sup>

Etty resisted the terror of hopelessness, despair meaninglessness and maintained a zest for life refusing hatred and bitterness while expressing a love in action for humankind on all sides of the barbed wire.<sup>137</sup> (p. 636) In the process, she sanctions an impossible forgiveness and attempts a poetic transformation of the world that continues to speak the name of God in a context of the worst things humans do to each other.

The first review of the diaries was written by Etty herself. She estimates she has written 1,500 pages<sup>138</sup> “What a rich life leaps out at me from every page! To think it was my life – and still is.” (p. 569). And, in that diary, she once wrote:

The main thing is, that even as we die a terrible death we are able to feel right to the very last moment that life has meaning and beauty, that we have realised our potential and lived a good life. (p. 474)<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> .... We are called upon to supply what is missing in God, to provide the actualisation of God in the world, to carry out the translation of the event harboured in [God’s] name into actuality.” John D Caputo, ‘The Insistence and Existence of God: A Response to DeRoo’ in Marko Zlomislac and Neal DeRoo, *Cross and Khora: Deconstruction and Christianity in the Work of John D Caputo* (Eugene: Pickwick 2010) p. 322

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322.

<sup>135</sup> John D Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2013) p. 14.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Which, as she says, is “more of question of attitude” anyway. (*Etty*, p. 583)

<sup>138</sup> What remains amounts to 1281 pages. If we add 128 pages for the missing diary book 7 it makes her estimate about right.

<sup>139</sup> After Etty left for the first time for Westerbork Han wrote “Intrinsically strong, perhaps even cheerfully, she accepted her fate, convinced that she could offer support to her fellow-sufferers, wherever she would go. Her heart and mind have developed in uncommon harmony: truly, a great girl.” (p. 741)