

The Lasting Significance of ETTY HILLESUM'S WRITINGS

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The Lasting Significance of Etty Hillesum's Writings

*Proceedings of the Third International Etty Hillesum
Conference at Middelburg, September 2018*

*Edited by
Klaas A.D. Smelik*

Amsterdam University Press

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This volume has been produced under supervision of the Eddy Hillesum
Research Centre, Middelburg.

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Cover illustration: Last page of the 11th diary (fragment)
Source: Collection Jewish Historical Museum Amsterdam

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden
Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 202 5
e-ISBN 978 90 4855 017 3 (pdf)
DOI 10.5117/9789463722025
NUR 680

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We are grateful to the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam for the permission to publish the illustrations 1, 4-6 in this volume, and to Uitgeverij Balans for the permission to publish illustration 7.

Preface

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

We have the honour to present in this volume the proceedings of the Third International Etty Hillesum Conference held in September 2018 meeting in Middelburg, Zeeland, the city where Etty Hillesum was born in 1914. The Etty Hillesum Research Centre in cooperation with University College Roosevelt invited scholars from around the world to exchange insights and to discuss problems that arise when studying Etty Hillesum's writings. Forty speakers presented papers and there was a wonderful performance of the theatre play *Blazing Harmonies* written by Stephen Cherry, Dean of King's College, Cambridge, and performed by him and the gifted English actress Rosie Hillal. In this volume, most of the papers presented at the conference have been included in revised and annotated versions.

Looking back at the conference with gratitude, we would like to thank the various people and organisations who made the meeting possible. First of all, we thank those who presented their papers and all others who accepted our invitation to attend the conference and through their enthusiasm and interest in Etty Hillesum's literary heritage made it an unforgettable experience. We especially thank Rosie Hillal for her most impressive performance, Bert van den Brink, Dean of University College Roosevelt Middelburg, for his cordial welcome, Han Polman, King's Commissioner in the province of Zeeland, for opening, and Harald Bergmann, Mayor of Middelburg, for closing the conference. Special thanks also to Ms. Michael Strange and Caroline Diepeveen, whose assistance in editing the texts has proven most helpful and whose dedication we appreciate very much.

A number of organisations and institutions provided us with indispensable aid, enabling us to carry out the conference in the beautiful surroundings of the ancient Town Hall of Middelburg. In alphabetic order, they are: the Etty Hillesum Foundation, Amsterdam, the Municipality of Middelburg, the Province of Zeeland and the University College Roosevelt. We express our sincerest thanks for their support.

We are grateful to Amsterdam University Press for recognizing the importance of the manuscript from the proceedings and for accepting it for publication. And we would like to thank Julie Benschop-Plokker for her continuous assistance in the process of producing this volume.

We end with a note to the reader: The quotations from Etty Hillesum's writings are taken from *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, translated by Arnold J. Pomerans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). This complete English edition of Etty Hillesum's literary heritage is indicated with the abbreviation E.T. In the footnotes, the reader will find the original Dutch (or German) text of the passages quoted from the diaries and letters. These quotations are cited from Etty Hillesum, *Het Werk* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2012). In this way, we hope to encourage our readers to become acquainted with Hillesum's original text.

15 April 2019

Klaas A.D. Smelik

Introduction

In autumn 1979, Klaas A.D. Smelik shared with the Dutch publisher, Jan Geurt Gaarlandt, a piece of Etty Hillesum's diaries transcribed by his half-sister Johanna Smelik, whom Hillesum called "Jopie" in her diaries. Unlike publishers in the 1950s, when his father Klaas Smelik Sr. had tried in vain to get Hillesum's diaries published, Gaarlandt immediately understood the value of the texts and moved to publish selections from them. An anthology appeared in 1981 under the Dutch title *Het verstoorde leven* [An Interrupted Life].¹ From the very beginning, the book was an overwhelming success. Many translations followed and Etty Hillesum became renowned internationally.² The remarkable global reception included some extreme reactions: hagiographic admiration, identification, lack of understanding and outright rejection. Every author claimed to know the truth about Etty Hillesum without any consideration of the research done by others.

The worldwide response to Hillesum's writings was, moreover, based on the selection of texts made by the publisher himself and taken from an unreliable transcription of the original manuscript.³ An unabridged and scholarly edition of Hillesum's texts, both her diaries and letters, was required. The Etty Hillesum Foundation in Amsterdam asked Klaas A.D.

1 Later on, Gaarlandt published two other selection from Hillesum's writings: Etty Hillesum, *Het denkende hart van de barak: Brieven van Etty Hillesum*, with an introduction by J.G. Gaarlandt (Haarlem: De Haan, 1982), and Etty Hillesum, *In duizend zoete armen: Nieuwe dagboekanteekeningen van Etty Hillesum*, with an introduction by J.G. Gaarlandt (Haarlem: De Haan, 1984).

2 Meanwhile, the diaries have been translated in 18 languages: Czech, Danish, English, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Modern Hebrew, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, and Swedish.

3 Jan Geurt Gaarlandt elucidates the criteria for his selection from the diaries in his contribution "Context, dilemmas, and misunderstandings during the composition and publication of *An Interrupted Life: Etty Hillesum's Diary, 1941-1943*," in: Klaas A.D. Smelik, Ria van den Brandt & Meins G.S. Coetsier (eds.), *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008* (Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, 11; Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2010), 365-375.

Smelik to address this need and, assisted by a group of young scholars, in 1986 he published a complete annotated edition of all then available texts of Ety Hillesum: *Ety: De nagelaten geschriften van Ety Hillesum, 1941-1943*.⁴ The unabridged edition has been reprinted several times; the sixth edition appeared in 2012 with a different title: *Ety Hillesum, Het Werk*. In each new edition, annotations have been updated and revised where necessary, and newly discovered texts by Ety Hillesum added. In 2002, the complete edition appeared in English translation,⁵ followed by a French version in 2008⁶ and in 2012-2013 by an Italian translation in two volumes.⁷ A German translation of the complete edition is in preparation.

In 1989, Jan Geurt Gaarlandt expressed his astonishment at the many reviews and essays on Ety Hillesum:

It's shocking to read how many different aspects one can discover in her life and work. Literary, mystical, philosophical, historical, theological, psychological and therapeutic perspectives have generated material for many essays. She is compared and connected to people like Kafka, Meister Eckhart, Ruusbroec, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Rilke, Jung, Seneca, Carry van Bruggen, Bonhoeffer, important representatives of literature, theology and philosophy. It has been said that her diary belongs to the most important documents of this century.⁸

The colourful but sometimes controversial reception of Hillesum's writings has continued long after 1989. Numerous books and essays have been written, conferences and seminars organized, classes given and artistic productions created. Each language, each cultural or religious domain seems to produce

4 *Ety: De nagelaten geschriften van Ety Hillesum, 1941-1943*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik; text edition: Gideon Lodders & Rob Tempelaars (Amsterdam: Balans, 1986).

5 *Ety: The Letters and Diaries of Ety Hillesum, 1941-1943*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik; translated by Arnold J. Pomerans (Ottawa, ON / Grand Rapids, MI: Novalis Saint Paul University / William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002).

6 *Hillesum: Les écrits d'Ety Hillesum: Journaux et lettres 1941-1943*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik; translated by Philippe Noble & Isabelle Rosselin (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008).

7 *Diario: Edizione integrale 1941-1942*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik; translated by Chiara Passanti & Tina Montone (Milano: Adelphi Edizioni, 2012). *Lettere: Edizione integrale 1941-1943*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik; translated by Chiara Passanti, Tina Montone & Ada Vigliani (Milano: Adelphi Edizioni, 2013).

8 Jan Geurt Gaarlandt, "Men zou een pleister op vele wonden willen zijn," in Jan Geurt Gaarlandt (ed.), *Men zou een pleister op vele wonden willen zijn: Reacties op de dagboeken en brieven van Ety Hillesum* (Amsterdam: Balans, 1989), ix-xi, especially p. x [translated from the Dutch].

a different image of her.⁹ At the same time, the diverse readings from various countries show remarkable similarities and unexpected connections.¹⁰ In this situation, an international exchange of ideas and perspectives became an imperative and in 2006 Klaas A.D. Smelik answered the call. The Etty Hillesum Research Centre was founded at Ghent University in that year with the express purpose of coordinating international Hillesum research.¹¹

By 2008, the Etty Hillesum Research Centre had organized its first international conference in Ghent, focusing on two central themes in Hillesum's work: spirituality and writing. The papers were published in 2010 by Brill Boston in a volume in English, entitled *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum*.¹²

In January 2014, one hundred years after Etty Hillesum's birth, a second international conference was organized by the Etty Hillesum Research Centre in Ghent.¹³ Again, Hillesum scholars from all over the world presented papers and gathered in the beautiful university building 't Pand. The papers, revised and annotated, were (partly) published in 2017 by Brill Boston in English in a volume entitled *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum*.¹⁴

And in September 2018, a third international conference on Etty Hillesum was organized by the Etty Hillesum Research Centre. Held in the ancient Town Hall of Middelburg, the centre of the University College Roosevelt, this conference was not only in the city of Etty Hillesum's birth, it began 75 years to the day when Etty Hillesum and her family arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau, never to return again. The papers of the Hillesum scholars from this conference have been collected in this volume in revised and annotated

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

10 See for instance Yukiko Yokohata, "Perceptions of Etty Hillesum in Japan," in: Klaas A.D. Smelik, Gerrit Van Oord & Jurjen Wiersma (eds.), *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context: Writings, Life, and Influences of a Visionary Author* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 395-417.

11 In 2015, the Etty Hillesum Research Centre moved to Middelburg, the capital of the Dutch province of Zeeland, where Etty Hillesum was born on 15 January 1914.

12 Klaas A.D. Smelik, Ria van den Brandt & Meins G.S. Coetsier (eds.), *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008* (Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, 11; Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2010).

13 Organized by the Etty Hillesum Research Centre, Ghent University, in cooperation with the Instituut Judaicum, Interuniversity Centre for the Academic Study of Judaism in Belgium.

14 . Klaas A.D. Smelik, Meins G.S. Coetsier & Jurjen Wiersma (eds.), *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, January 2014* (Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, 28; Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2017).

versions reflecting the different premises, approaches, and disciplinary tools of the conference participants. Each one is a unique contribution. Let us have a look at these papers.

In her contribution “Music as Metaphor in Etty Hillesum’s Spirituality,” the American researcher Nancy JP Anderson investigates the role of music in Hillesum’s diaries and letters. She points to the fact that Hillesum’s spirituality was not an awakening as much as a slow dawning composed over time. Hillesum used the metaphor of music to refer to the way she got in touch with her own spiritual melody. She learned to nurture the undertones that would sustain her through the difficulties she faced in occupied Holland.

In his essay “A ‘staretz’ in Camp Westerbork,” the Spanish theologian Fernando Arriero Peranton investigates the connections between Slavic Orthodoxy and Etty Hillesum’s spirituality. He maintains that it is possible to draw a parallel between her kind of spirituality and Russian Orthodox mysticism. He notes striking connections between the two: the need of muting the mind to reach the heart, the desire for a permanent state of prayer, non-violence, and the importance of being more than doing. Looked at in this way, Etty Hillesum could be seen as a “Russian spiritual father” – a *staretz* – in Camp Westerbork.

The Roman scholar Emilio Baccharini is very impressed with Etty Hillesum’s writings. In his contribution “Etty Hillesum: Humanity as a Task,” he says metaphorically that meeting Etty Hillesum through her diary and letters is like seeing a spark of light at the bottom of an abyss of evil. Hillesum’s task on the road to humanity was to establish a balance between “inside” and “outside”; to find the centre of herself and fill every moment of life with meaning. The source from which this meaning originates, the author calls *ordo amoris* – a term dear to mystical theology and taken up by Max Scheler in his ontology.

In her contribution “Etty Hillesum & Albert Konrad Gemmeker: A Twofold Analysis of the Perpetration of the Westerbork Commander,” EHOCS scholar Lotte Bergen analyzes how Gemmeker, the commander of *Durchgangslager* Westerbork, became known as the “gentleman-commander”. As well, the author deals with how Etty Hillesum did not follow along with this positive assessment of the key player in the *Entjudung* of the Netherlands – notwithstanding his polite and seemingly friendly behaviour towards the Jewish prisoners. During his trial after the war, Gemmeker, trying to minimize his role, declared – like many other Nazi perpetrators – that he did not know of the extermination of millions of innocent Jews in Eastern Europe. But Etty Hillesum – unlike Gemmeker’s judges – was not blindsided by the commander’s correct behaviour. In her letters, she described, criticized, and

exposed the commander of Camp Westerbork as one of the most important executioners in the German system. Hillesum insisted that he had far more agency to act on his own responsibility than he would later admit during trial.

The Dutch scholar Ria van den Brandt has done extensive research into the friendship booklet *Levenskunst: Gedachten van week tot week* [Art of Living: Thoughts from Week to Week] that Etty Hillesum received from her friend Henny Tideman and in which she copied passages from authors she admired. In Van den Brandt's contribution, "Now is the Time to Put into Practice: Love Your Enemies": Several Notes on Hillesum's 'Love for Enemies' in *Levenskunst*," she focuses on Hillesum's quotes related to love for one's enemy. She finds conspicuous the number of references to the Gospel of Matthew, particularly the Sermon on the Mount. Hillesum also often quoted Russian authors writing about the awareness of guilt and sin. Van den Brandt describes the literary-historical context of Hillesum's growing interest in the Gospel of Matthew and suggests a possible radicalization in Hillesum's later writings on the love for one's enemy.

Although Etty Hillesum briefly mentions the name of Kierkegaard in her diaries, we do not know if she read any of his work, or if she did, what exactly and how intensively. But when writing of her worries about the future, she regularly quoted chapter 6 of the Gospel of Matthew – a passage that Kierkegaard had commented upon extensively in his *Discourses*. Is it possible that Etty Hillesum knew these discourses? In his contribution "The Cares of the Pagans: The Reading of Matthew 6:25-34 by Søren Kierkegaard and Etty Hillesum," the Swiss scholar Pierre Bühler compares from several perspectives Kierkegaard's and Hillesum's reading of Matthew 6. He discovers in both authors what John D. Caputo has called *quotidianism*; for Søren Kierkegaard as well as Etty Hillesum, it was essential to devote all attention to living in the present.

In his essay, "Dialogizing Life amidst a Culture of Death: Etty Hillesum, Dostoevsky's *Grand Inquisitor* and Nazi Reductionism," the Australian scholar John Cartner stresses the difference between the discourse of the Nazis and that of Etty Hillesum. Her diaries and letters, in both their form and content, can be seen as a repudiation of the Nazis' monologically constituted, reductive discourse. Unlike her oppressors, Hillesum embraced the *Other* and allowed their voices to saturate her writings and inform her *Weltanschauung*. One such voice was that of the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky. Through an examination of "The Grand Inquisitor" and Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* of which it is a part, Cartner examines their influence on Hillesum's all-embracing worldview. In contrast to the diabolical markers of Nazi discourse, it is Cartner's seminal idea that Etty

Hillesum's dialogically constituted writings, which foreground a concern for the *Other*, actually reflected the discourse of the Deity.

The Cambridge scholar Stephen Cherry admits that it may seem an unlikely exercise to compare the fourteenth-century Christian visionary and anchorite, known as Julian of Norwich, with the twentieth-century Jewish author Etty Hillesum. Although Etty Hillesum longed for a convent cell at times, she committed herself to solidarity with her fellow Jews at a perilous time, while Julian opted for complete seclusion. Nevertheless, Cherry proves in his contribution, "Patience and Hope in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Etty Hillesum" that such a comparison is fruitful. He shows that these two women can be seen as kindred spirits. He points out their openness to suffering, the way in which they related to others, and their determination to find beauty in the most unpromising of circumstances. For both of them, patience was hard but important work, and hope was a quality intrinsically connected to practical, intimate, mutual and vulnerable loving-kindness.

Most readers of Etty Hillesum's diaries are convinced that Julius Spier taught her to pray while kneeling, but the Dutch scholar Marja Clement does not share this opinion. In her essay "The Girl Who Could Not Kneel: Etty Hillesum and the Turn Inward," she examines the way Etty Hillesum described in her diaries her process of turning inward and finding the deepest and best in herself, which she called God. While admitting that Julius Spier played an important role in this process, Clement questions the general opinion that Hillesum discovered and developed the gesture of kneeling under his influence. She maintains that this gesture was encountered by Etty Hillesum herself and the process of discovery was well underway before Julius Spier suggested she pray in this rather Roman Catholic manner.

Both Etty Hillesum and Charlotte Salomon were creative and productive young women. They were of child-bearing age during the Second World War, but bore only cultural offspring. In her essay "Etty Hillesum and Charlotte Salomon: Pregnancy as a Theme in Their Lives and Works," the Dutch researcher Denise de Costa reflects on the lives and legacies of Charlotte Salomon and Etty Hillesum, emphasizing the connection between fertility in a biological and a cultural sense. The author of this chapter is influenced and inspired by the work of three women: Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, both feminist theorists, and the late Dutch philosopher Rina Van der Haegen.

Etty Hillesum and Clarice Lispector were two brilliant authors who belonged to the same generation and were both victims of Nazi persecution. Most references to the two women consider them mystical writers who revealed an unconventional notion of God. For both, the use of language to represent reality meant being removed from full participation in the

reality being described. For both, the search for the divine was connected to the failure of language. In her contribution “Wandering Beyond Words: Ety Hillesum and Clarice Lispector,” the Dutch-Portuguese researcher Patricia Couto points to the fact that Hillesum’s and Lispector’s task was itself contradictory and impossible. After all, their medium was language and if it removed them from their own experience, how did they get beyond words? Hillesum and Lispector faced this paradox and did indeed meet finding ways to describe the world’s turn towards darkness and to reveal their own journey through these events.

The suggestive testimonies of Ety Hillesum and Primo Levi urge the reader to reflect upon one of the most important questions of our time: What constitutes a human being? There are no answers given. But thanks to the poetical function in their narratives, and considering the vulnerable communication between author and reader, what emerges from Hillesum and Levi is a serious call to take responsibility, cooperate with the text, and let it affect you. In her essay “‘Verbalize, Vocalize, Visualize’: Creative Death and Performative Writing in the Testimonies of Hillesum and Levi,” the Swedish scholar Maria Essunger argues that Hillesum’s and Levi’s writings affect us and change our perception of life as well as of our inner selves *if* we are willing to cooperate – critically and constructively – with their texts.

Although from different backgrounds and perspectives, Ety Hillesum and Simone Weil shared an attentive look at reality that made them able to understand contemporary events and to reject any kind of totalitarianism out of hand. As well, the two women believed in the need to re-found Europe upon a new humanism, and to create a new civilization based on a real sense of justice. In her contribution “A ‘No’ that Is an Affirmation: Ety Hillesum and Simone Weil Against the Laws of Force,” the Italian researcher Laura Fasani focuses on the specifics of each woman’s opposition to evil and shows that their choices led them both to say “no” to the outrages of history in the name of every human being.

Self-narration has often been perceived as a narcissistic display, a rupture with the outside world. Ety Hillesum’s diary has not been spared this accusation. Italian researcher Sara Gomel, in her contribution, “From Enclosure to Disclosure: Images of the Self in Ety Hillesum’s Diary,” shows that the opposite process takes place in Hillesum’s diaries, where narrative and ethics mingle and “dis-closure” of the Self is what enables the encounter with the other. Gomel analyzes this process of transformation from enclosure to disclosure by looking at the images Hillesum employed to portray the Self, images which were at first restricted, personal, and limited, but with time, evolved into wider, more open representations.

The diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum illuminate her path of individuation. In her contribution “A Story of Individuation in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: A Jungian Perspective,” the American Jungian psychotherapist Maribeth Kallemeyn explores how Hillesum wrestled with individuation and shows the growing depth she attained, absorbing three key elements of individuation: a link with primal sources, genuine interpersonal encounter, and acknowledgment of pauses. In addition, the author discusses the risk of psychological projection when reading Etty Hillesum’s writings.

The purpose of Marc P. Lalonde’s essay “Mad Midrash in the Diaries of Etty Hillesum” is to examine Hillesum’s wartime reflections on the divine-human interaction as a species of “mad midrash”. According to the modern Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim, *mad midrash* is an inventive, theological narrative that responds to the inconceivable bond between the world, the divine and “the anti-world”, i.e. Auschwitz. It is “mad” because the relationship strikes one as impossible, and yet it exists. In answer to such an aberration, mad midrash dares to voice, to protest against, and to partially mend an unthinkable history that is the Shoah. Hillesum’s mad midrash, the author claims, involves a depiction of God without recourse and a human(e) existence that says “God lived, even in these times”. To flesh out this idea, the author explores the act of diary writing as something that proliferates in times of historical turmoil, and finally, as a type of mad midrash.

In his contribution “The Mystery of Encounter: Poetry and Faith After Auschwitz in the Work of Paul Celan and Etty Hillesum,” the German scholar Ulrich Lincoln constructs a dialogue between Etty Hillesum and the poet Paul Celan. Both writers try to come to terms, poetically and conceptually, with the Shoah. Both find their own language to search for the power of the human encounter in the face of existential nothingness and semantic levelling. Hillesum’s work, just as Celan’s poems, can be understood as a search for subtlety in language capable of expressing meaning in the face of meaninglessness.

The American scholar William C. McDonough’s essay, “Can Religion Help Heal a World Broken by Trauma? Etty Hillesum as Our Ancestor in the *Qahal Goyim*,” draws the reader’s attention to the research on trauma. The author then goes on to state that Etty Hillesum is a religious model for responding to trauma. Tempted to withdraw from the horrors, Hillesum instead saw herself as part of a spiritual heritage and committed to acts of love for the other. The author concludes that Etty Hillesum can be seen as our contemporary Jacob, our ancestor in the assembly of peoples – a Hebrew idea going back to Genesis 35:11.

Etty Hillesum found an inner path to liberation, and in the face of the horror of her times, she discovered “union with the ground of her being”. In her contribution “The Contours of These Times: Etty Hillesum as Chronicler of Love Transcending Hate in Her Times, for Our Time, for All Time,” the American scholar Barbara Morrill explores aspects of Etty Hillesum’s process of transcending the evil and hatred in her time, and posits that it can be seen as a model for opposing the seemingly ubiquitous rise of nationalism, neo-fascism and/or illiberalism throughout much of Europe and the United States in our time. In an even broader sense, the author cautions that the tension that exists between democratic and fascist principles, or open and closed systems is something that should concern us in all times.

Ever since the public read parts of Hillesum’s diaries in *An Interrupted Life*, it has been obvious that Etty Hillesum’s first encounter with Julius Spier was a major step in her personal development. In her essay “Etty Hillesum’s Hand Analysis: The Prologue to Her Diaries,” the Dutch researcher Alexandra H.M. Nagel finds powerful evidence to back up this assumption. The author argues that the report made during their first meeting on 3 February 1941, when Spier analyzed Etty Hillesum’s hands, captured a pivotal moment. Several elements that Spier noted down about Hillesum when “reading” her hands, became themes in her diaries. Spier’s report is thus a prologue to the diaries. This chapter contains the report in an amended, more easily readable version so that all Hillesum scholars may examine the content of this most unusual document.

The experience of pain and suffering accompanies the life of all human beings, in different ways, in the most diverse contexts throughout the history of humanity. The reality of the world we live in, is no exception; we are permanently “exposed”. In her essay “Suffering, Silence, and Wisdom in the Life of Etty Hillesum,” the Colombian scholar Rosana Elena Navarro Sánchez considers the evolution of the meaning of suffering in Etty Hillesum’s writings. She wants to establish the relationship between the experience of suffering and the experience of silence. As well, she writes of the progressive emergence of wisdom in Hillesum’s personal experience.

In her essay “Feeding the Soul: Etty Hillesum’s Pedagogical and Spiritual Path,” the Italian scholar Maria Gabriella Nocita reconstructs the path that Etty Hillesum followed during the years of the Shoah. On her way to the realization of the “self that one is”, Hillesum understood that “body and soul are one”, and that “the inner world is as real as the outer world” and that both need care. Taking care of one’s soul is not as obvious as taking care of one’s body; the soul’s needs are commonly ignored or misunderstood. To decode the soul’s needs, Hillesum developed a form of *philosophizing*

for life that saw the human being as both subject and object of the enquiry and that humanized the individual who pursued this knowledge. The author concludes that through Etty Hillesum, we can learn to cultivate this knowledge of the soul.

In his contribution “Am I Really a Woman? A Question About Female Identity in Etty Hillesum,” the Colombian researcher William Augusto Peña Esquivel sheds new light on the mystical itinerary of Etty Hillesum. He shows how her female identity is constituted in parallel to her inner search and her development as a mystic. Femininity and the realization of self as a woman, when taken from the particular perspective of Etty Hillesum’s writings, emerges as a path to freedom.

Etty Hillesum and Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived in what Hannah Arendt called “Dark Times”. Their lives and work show us that even in the worst places and situations, light is possible and hope can be maintained. Besides emphasizing how they both practised an ethics of care, the Portuguese scholar Maria Luísa Ribeiro Ferreira pays special attention in her essay “A Powerless God: Etty Hillesum and Dietrich Bonhoeffer” to their mutual concept of God – a powerless God who needs the help of human beings.

In her contribution “New Light on Etty Hillesum’s Actions in Camp Westerbork,” the Dutch scholar Bettine Siertsema draws our attention to a hitherto unknown testimony about Hillesum’s activities in Camp Westerbork: a text written by Ies [later: Matthew] Spetter in the fall of 1945. Spetter was one of Etty Hillesum’s colleagues on the Jewish Council in Camp Westerbork. Like Hillesum, he was opposed to the ways in which the Amsterdam Jewish Council responded to the Nazis’ demands. In his post-war testimony, Spetter referred very briefly to cooperating with Etty Hillesum to smuggle children out of Camp Westerbork. Spetter managed to survive the Shoah, and his post-war activities show that to a great extent, he and Etty Hillesum shared the same views on life and humanity. This until now unknown testimony may well mandate a shift in how we interpret what has generally been viewed as Hillesum’s total acceptance of her fate.

Etty Hillesum showed a special attachment to the desk in her room in Han Wegerif’s house in Amsterdam. It was her favourite place to be even if other parts of her room were also very dear and had a special meaning for her. Nevertheless, she did not grieve when she had to leave because – as she explained – “In every place on earth, we *are* ‘at home’, when we carry everything within us.” In his contribution “‘My Beloved Desk, the Best Place on this Earth’: Etty Hillesum Says Goodbye to Her Familiar Surroundings,” Klaas A.D. Smelik analyzes Hillesum’s remarks on the various parts of Wegerif’s house and discusses the special meaning they had for her.

In his essay, “Etty Hillesum’s Humanism,” the Dutch scholar Jurjen Wiersma offers ethical, philosophical, and theological comments on Hillesum’s diaries and letters. He stresses that excellent moral status provides leverage for the *humanum*, and elevates human persons to increased humanity. In Etty Hillesum’s case, it inspired her to oppose hatred, anger, and barbarism. Hillesum wanted to be faithful to God, but also to all living co-creatures, to her own best moments, and to her creative talent. The author maintains that Hillesum displayed a specific Jewish identity when she, in spite of everything, committed herself to biblical humanism, to God and his creation.

In his essay “Etty Hillesum’s Struggle to See Clearly: A Story of Two Worlds,” the English scholar Patrick Woodhouse explores the question: How was it possible to continue to see the Nazis as human beings created in the image of God as Etty Hillesum did? The contribution begins with Etty Hillesum gazing at the brutal faces of the guards loading the train destined for the death camps, and explores her reaction to what she sees, noting that her reaction is a statement of what she has become. The essay traces how – in the midst of a world collapsing around her – Etty Hillesum learned to inhabit an inner world that shared characteristics common to the contemplative traditions of all the great faiths. This contribution is a reminder that her story is a story not of one, but of two worlds.

In “Present Traces of a Past Existence: Through the Lens of Photography” – the last contribution in this volume – the Italian artist and researcher Lucrezia Zanardi starts with the question: What happens to a space when it is inhabited by different people? Does the presence of its previous inhabitants persist? Is the space merely architectural or is it pervaded by the acts of the subjects and therefore bound in some way to the former occupants? The author, having photographed every space once inhabited by Etty Hillesum, presents a playful exploration of these questions. Photography is the perfect medium to work through these problems as it is able to suggest and maintain a trace of a presence alongside a look from the past. In addition, photography is a highly psychological medium that allows one, just like a diary, to review and rework a vision.

The 29 contributions in this volume reflect various new developments in the study of the literary heritage of Etty Hillesum. Since the first publication and translations of her diaries and letters in the 1980s, much creative work has been done and new approaches have been found. International research has shown how multifaceted her thought was and has stressed the viability of her views for our present situation. This Jewish woman, murdered 75 years ago by the Nazis, was convinced that humanity and human dignity could

survive in a barbaric world. ETTY Hillesum hoped for a better world after the war, but any daily newspaper today shows that we still have a long way to go. For our lives, her writings can serve as a guideline and they deserve our continued attention – which is the purpose of the ETTY Hillesum Research Centre in Middelburg.