

Introduction

Eight exercise books closely written in a small hard-to-decipher hand – I have been endlessly preoccupied ever since by what I found there: the life of Etty Hillesum. These exercise books set out the story of a 27-year-old woman from Amsterdam. They cover the years 1941 and 1942, years of war and oppression for Holland, but for Etty a time of personal growth and, paradoxically enough, of personal liberation. Those were the very years when the scenario of extermination was being played out all over Europe. Etty Hillesum was Jewish and she wrote a counter-scenario.

Between her entry for Thursday, 10 November 1941 – ‘Mortal fear in every fibre. Complete collapse. Lack of self-confidence. Aversion. Panic’, and that of Friday, 3 July 1942 – ‘Very well then, this new certainty, that what they are after is our total destruction, I accept it. I know it now and I shall not burden others with my fears. I shall not be bitter if others fail to grasp what is happening to us Jews. I work and continue to live with the same conviction and I find life meaningful – yes, meaningful’ – between these two entries, Etty’s whole existence is bracketed. And the many intervening incidents: her relationship with lovers and friends, family and colleagues, her moods and feelings, her thoughts about Judaism, women, passion, the growing evidence of disruption in the world around her – she examined everything and recorded it all frankly, clearly and intensely. Lest she lose her grip on a ‘tempestuous, havoc-ridden world’, she searched for the sources of her existence, finally discovering an attitude to life that is best described as radical altruism. The last words in her

diary are: 'We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds.'

The diary begins on Sunday, 9 March 1941. In late January or early February of that year she had met a man who was to become the focus of all her thoughts and emotions. That man was Julius Spier, the founder of 'psychochirology', i.e. the study and classification of palm prints. Spier – to whom Etty refers as S. throughout – was a Jewish emigrant from Berlin, born in Frankfurt on 25 April 1887. He had once been a bank manager, and over the years discovered a talent for reading hands and palms. He also founded a publishing house, took singing lessons and then moved to Zürich for analysis training under Carl Gustav Jung. It was Jung who persuaded him to turn 'psychochirology' into a full-time profession.

Wherever Spier went, he attracted disciples. In 1939 he joined his sister in The Netherlands. His children, Ruth and Wolfgang, stayed on in Germany with his non-Jewish wife, from whom he had been divorced in 1935. A very unusual man, Spier has been called a 'magical personality' by many of his admirers, especially women. And indeed he seems to have had a most unusual gift for reading people's life from their palms, and for interpreting the results with rare psychological insight. These sober facts cannot, of course, hope to convey the restorative effect his work had on a great many people.

For Etty, at least, he became a catalyst, setting her on the path to which she first tried to give a name on Sunday, 9 March – on a constant search for the essential, the truly human, in dramatic opposition to the inhumanity around her. One can follow her and even identify with her in her struggle with the forces of self and the forces of history.

In the process Etty developed a religious sensibility which gives her writings an enormous spiritual dimension. The word 'God' occurs in even her earliest entries although there she uses it – we often do in daily speech –

almost unconsciously. Gradually, however, she moves towards an even more intense dialogue with the divine. Etty's entries completely change style whenever she addresses God, and she addresses Him regularly, without the least embarrassment. Her religiosity is totally unconventional. In Holland now Christians and Jews are claiming Etty as someone who is typically Christian or typically Jewish – an unprofitable discussion, because Etty chooses her own way. She has her own religious rhythm – not inspired by church or synagogue, or by dogmas, theology, liturgy or tradition – all these were completely alien to her. She addresses God as she does herself. 'When I pray,' she writes, 'I hold a silly, naive or deadly serious dialogue *with what is deepest inside me, which for convenience' sake I call God.*' And later, 'And that probably best expresses my feeling for life: I repose in myself. And that part of myself, that deepest and richest part in which I repose, is what I call "God".'

The way in which she is sometimes absorbed in her conversation with God seems to be pure mysticism. Was she a mystic? Perhaps, but one who wrote, 'Mysticism must rest on crystal-clear honesty, and can only come after things have been stripped down to their naked reality.' Her mysticism led her not into solitary contemplation but squarely back into the world of action. Her vision had nothing to do with escape or self-deception, and everything to do with a hard-won, steady and whole perception of reality. One can find her God very much in line with her own capacity to see the truth, to bear it and find consolation in it.

We know little about Etty's life before the war. Esther, as her official first name was, was born on 15 January 1914 in Middelburg, where her father, Dr L. Hillesum, taught classical languages. After moves to Tiel and Winschoten he and his family settled down in 1924 in Deventer, a

medium-sized city in the east of Holland, beautifully situated by the river IJssel. There he became assistant headmaster and four years later headmaster of the Municipal Gymnasium.

Etty's father was an excellent and disciplined scholar – books and intellectual pursuits filled his life. Etty's mother, Rebecca Bernstein, was Russian by birth, and had fled to The Netherlands after yet another pogrom. She was passionate, chaotic and in almost everything the opposite of her husband. That led to a quite tempestuous marriage in the stately house at 9 Geert Grootestraat and how much that affected the three children I cannot say.

Etty and her brothers Mischa and Jaap were, however, all very intelligent and gifted. Etty's own direction in those days in Deventer was not yet fixed. Witty, vivid, eager to read books and to study philosophy, she was far ahead of her schoolfriends. Mischa was a brilliant musician, who played Beethoven in public at the age of 6. He was considered by many to be one of the most promising pianists in Europe. His talent as a musician dominated the daily course of the household. And the youngest, Jaap, discovered some new vitamins when he was 17, for which he won entrance to all the academic laboratories. This was quite unusual for a medical student. Later he became a doctor.

Etty left her father's school in 1932, went on to take her first degree in Law at the University of Amsterdam, then enrolled in the Faculty of Slavonic Languages. By the time she turned to the study of psychology the Second World War was in full swing and her life had begun to assume the character we discern in these diaries.

Etty's life in Amsterdam is not easy to reconstruct. In her diaries she talks most of the time about two specific groups of people – one belonging to the so-called 'Spiergroup', the other to the 'family' of five with whom she lived in one house. Another part of her life she spent in

the academic world of students and professors of Russian language, such as Professors Van Wijk and Becker, and through them she had connections with leftish student resistance. Becker recommended her as a Russian teacher and sent her pupils, which enabled her to earn some money.

Just before the war Etty moved to 6 Gabriël Metsstraat in South Amsterdam. It was a huge house where she had a room on the third floor overlooking the Museumplein, the main square in Amsterdam with the Concert-hall at one end and the Rijksmuseum at the other, and a skating club in the middle during the winter.

The owner of the house, Han Wegerif, a widower of 62, with his son Hans, aged 21, asked Etty to come to live there as a sort of housekeeper. Besides Han (Etty refers to him mostly as Father Han or Papa Han, although she soon developed an intimate relationship with him) and his son Hans, who was studying economics, there was a German cook called Käthe, a reasonable 'social-democrat' called Bernard, and Maria Tuinzing, a nurse who became one of Etty's best friends. The last two rented their rooms.

The other main circle which Etty describes is the group around Julius Spier, the psychochirologist. She probably met him at the end of January 1941 at a music evening at Mien Kuyper's, where her brother Mischa and another pianist, Evaristos Glassner, played and where Spier used to sing. Adri Holm, Henny Tideman ('Tide'), Dicky de Jonge, Liesl Levie and Etty gathered at 27 Courbetstraat in South Amsterdam where Spier rented a room in the house of the Nethe family. (Etty was separated from him, she writes, 'by three streets, a canal and a little bridge'.) Spier talked with them about palm prints and psychology and he also helped them all individually with therapy. After three or four therapeutic sessions Etty became his assistant ('my Russian secretary'), and after yet a while she became his lover and his intellectual partner.

In her diary Etty mentions a number of friends and acquaintances using just their first names. It is not essential to an understanding of the diary for us to know anything more about them, and indeed, in most cases I have not been able to find more information about them. Wherever I have thought it important I have added a note.

So far in this introduction I have hardly mentioned the war – intentionally – for Etty’s diary is in the first place a journey through her inner world. And that inner world of hers is not governed by the threat of the war – one could almost say that the war is dominated by Etty herself. At the time Etty started writing, however, Holland nevertheless fell more and more into the grip of Germany’s reign of terror. After the capitulation in May 1940 the Germans began gradually to isolate the Dutch Jews. When in February 1941 the first anti-pogrom strike in European history broke out in Amsterdam, the Nazis started to raise their pressure on the Jews and on any form of Dutch resistance. Jews were thrown out of their jobs, were forbidden to buy in normal stores, were maltreated, and ghettos were created and ‘working-camps’ set up. Then, on 29 April 1942 the star of David was forced upon the Jews: wholesale deportations took place that spring. The Nazis were trying to move all Jews to Westerbork, a transit camp (a ‘*Durchgangslager*’) in the east of The Netherlands not far from the German border. It was not itself an extermination camp but it was in fact the last stop before Auschwitz. Of course the shadow of these measures lies over the diary and Etty too becomes more and more involved in the war.

On 15 July 1942, through the influence of some friends, Etty was given a job as a typist in one of the departments of the Jewish Council. This was a council of twenty important Jews with a staff of several hundred people. As

in other occupied countries it was an organization that was formed at the instigation of the Germans and was placed between the Nazis and the mass of Jews. The Nazis gave orders to the Council and let it decide how and to whom the orders were handed out. This Council was under the illusion that it could by negotiation save the Jews from the worst. In this way it became a subtle weapon in the hands of the Nazis. (At the same time as Etty started her job a girl named Anne Frank, hidden in a house a few miles farther on, began writing her diary.)

For fourteen days Etty walked to 93 Amstel and back again and called it 'hell'. In the same month the first big round-up took place in Amsterdam and voluntarily Etty decided to go with the trapped Jews to Westerbork. She did not want to escape the fate of the Jewish people. She believed that she could do justice to life only if she did not abandon people in danger, and if she used her strength to bring light into the life of others. Survivors from the camp have confirmed that Etty was a 'luminous' personality to the last.

From August 1942 until September 1943 Etty stayed in Westerbork camp, working in the local hospital, but thanks to a special travel permit from the Jewish Council she was able to travel to Amsterdam a dozen times. She brought letters and messages from people in Westerbork to Amsterdam and even to resistance groups, and picked up medicines to bring back. Etty's health was often very bad and on one occasion she stayed in hospital in Amsterdam during one of her leaves. The last part of her diary is written in Amsterdam after her first stay of a month in Westerbork.

The camp was a community living in fear, doomed by the threat of the weekly transportation train leaving for Poland. Etty's friends in Amsterdam tried to convince her that she had to hide and once there was even an attempt to kidnap her. She refused. On 7 September 1943, Etty, her father and mother and Mischa were placed on 'transport'.

The Diary

SUNDAY, 9 MARCH [1941]. Here goes, then. This is a painful and well-nigh insuperable step for me: yielding up so much that has been suppressed to a blank sheet of lined paper. The thoughts in my head are sometimes so clear and so sharp and my feelings so deep, but writing about them comes hard. The main difficulty, I think, is a sense of shame. So many inhibitions, so much fear of letting go, of allowing things to pour out of me, and yet that is what I must do if I am ever to give my life a reasonable and satisfactory purpose. It is like the final, liberating scream that always sticks bashfully in your throat when you make love. 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. The rest of me is like that, too. 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.

Let me fix that moment earlier ~~the morning~~, although it has nearly slipped from my ~~grasp~~ again. Through ~~my~~ brainwork I got the better of ~~him~~ ~~instantly~~ penetrating, clear gaze, his ~~with sensual mouth~~ like, burly figure and his feather ~~light~~ ~~movements~~.

54-year-old in whom the struggle between the spirit and the flesh is still in full cry. And it seemed as if I were being crushed under the weight of that struggle. I lay buried under his personality and could not get away; my own problems, which seemed to be much of the same kind, made me flounder. I can't really put it into words; in any case I am not yet as honest with myself as I should be, and it is always hard to get to the bottom of things with words.

First impression after a few minutes: a face that was not sensual, un-Dutch, a not unfamiliar type, not altogether sympathetic.

Second impression: intelligent, incredibly wise, age-old grey eyes, which drew one's attention from the full mouth, but not for long or altogether. I was awed by his skill, his ability to read my deepest conflicts from my second face: my hands. There was an oddly disagreeable moment, when my attention slipped and I thought he was referring to my parents when, in fact, he meant me: 'philosophically and intuitively gifted,' he said, and more in the same vein. He spoke as one might when giving sweets to a small child. 'Happy now? Look, here you are, you've got all these marvellous qualities, so why aren't you happy now?' I felt an instant dislike, a sense of humiliation, though it was probably only my aesthetic feelings that were hurt. Anyway, I thought he was pretty odious just then. But later those marvellously human eyes, sizing me up from out of grey depths, rested again on my own. I would dearly have liked to kiss those eyes.

Now that I think about it, there was another time, that Monday morning some weeks ago now, when he disgusted me. A year before, a pupil of his, Miss Holm,² had come to see him, covered from head to toe with eczema. Became his patient. Was cured. Now worships him, in a manner of speaking, although I'm not quite sure what manner that is exactly. My arrogance took over at one point and I said I'd prefer to solve my own problems.

Meaningfully Miss Holm said, 'No man is an island.' That had a nice, convincing ring to it. And then she spoke about the eczema that had afflicted her, including her face, so badly. And S. turned towards her with a gesture I can't recall accurately any longer but which I found very unpleasant: 'And what's your complexion like now, then, eh?' He could have been talking about a cow at market. I don't know, but I thought he was vile at that moment, sensual, a bit cynical, and yet there was something else about him too.

Then, at the end of the session: 'Now we must ask ourselves, what can we do to help this person?' Or maybe it was, 'This person needs help.' By that point I had been won over by the demonstration of his skill and I felt in need of his help.

And then there was his lecture. I only went to it so that I could watch him from a distance, examine him from afar before yielding myself unreservedly to him. The impression was good. First-rate lecture.

A charming man. Charming smile, despite the false teeth. I fell under the spell of the inner freedom that seemed to emanate from him, of the suppleness, ease, and singular grace of his heavy body. His face looked quite different again – it seems different every time I see it; back home, by myself, I cannot conjure it up in my mind. I try to assemble all the pieces I know as one might a jigsaw puzzle, but they refuse to fit together, remain in dimly-seen conflict. Sometimes I get a quick, clear glimpse of the face before me, but then it falls apart again into disparate pieces. Most annoying.

There were many attractive women and girls at his lecture. I was touched by the almost palpable love he was shown by several 'Aryan' girls – he, the Jew who had fled from Berlin, who had to come all the way from Germany to help them to inner peace. In the corridor stood a slender young girl,³ with a peaky, delicate, not altogether

healthy-looking face. As he passed – it was the interval – S. exchanged a few words with her and she gave a smile so charged with devotion, so obviously from the very depths of her soul, and so intense, that it almost hurt me. I was suddenly filled with a vague sense of unease, wondered whether all was really as it seemed, had the feeling: that man is stealing this young girl's smile, and all the tenderness this child bears him is stolen from someone else, from the man who will later be her own. What he did was pretty mean and unfair. He was clearly a dangerous man.

Next visit. 'I can only afford 20 guilders.' 'That's all right, you can come for two months, and I shan't turn you away after that either, if you still need me, that is.'

I had done it now, me with my 'spiritual constipation'. He would bring order to my inner chaos, harness the forces now at loggerheads within me. He took me metaphorically by the hand and said, look, that's how you should live. All my life I had had the feeling that, for all my apparent self-reliance, if someone came along, took me by the hand and bothered about me, I would be only too willing and eager to deliver myself up to his care. And there he was now, this complete stranger, this S. with his complicated face. And in just one week he worked wonders with me, almost in spite of myself. Gymnastics, breathing exercises, and illuminating, liberating words about my depression, my attitude to others and the like. Suddenly I was living differently, more freely, more *flowingly*, the costive feeling vanished, a little calm and order came into my life, at first entirely under the influence of his magical personality, but gradually with the assent of my own psyche, of my own awareness.

But to go back. 'Body and soul are one.' That was no doubt why he began to test my physical strength in a sort of wrestling match. It was apparently more than adequate for, remarkably enough, I floored the man, big though he

was. All my inner tensions, the bottled-up forces, broke free, and there he lay, physically and also mentally, as he told me later, thrown. No one had ever been able to do that to him before, and he could not conceive how I had managed it. His lip was bleeding. I was allowed to dab it clean with eau de cologne, an embarrassingly intimate thing to do. But then he was so 'free', so guileless, so open, so unaffected in his movements, even as we tumbled about together on the ground. And even when I, held tightly in his arms and finally tamed, lay under him, he remained 'objective', pure, while I surrendered to the physical spell he emanated. It all seemed so innocent, this wrestling, new and unexpected, and so liberating. It was not until later that it took hold of my fantasies.

SUNDAY NIGHT IN THE BATHROOM. Now I am immaculately clean from top to toe. Just the sound of his voice over the telephone tonight was enough to make my body betray me. But I swore like a navvy, telling myself that I was no longer a hysterical teenager. And I suddenly understood those monks who flagellate themselves to tame their sinful flesh. I fought a violent battle with myself. I raged, and then there was profound clarity and peace, and now I feel gloriously, immaculately clean inside and out. S. has been thrown again, for the umpteenth time. Will it go on like this for long? I am not in love with him, but sometimes I feel that his personality, not quite 'rounded' yet, still at odds with itself, is weighing me down. At the moment it is not. I can view him with detachment now: a living, battling man endowed with primitive strength, and yet spiritual, with penetrating eyes and a sensual mouth.

The day began so well, with my head bright and clear, and I made up my mind to write it all down later. But later came a really bad fit of depression, an inescapable pressure in my skull and gloomy thoughts, much too

gloomy to bear for long, and behind it all the emptiness of my quest; but that's something else I shall have to fight.

'Melodious rolls the world from God's right hand.' This line by Verwey⁴ was stuck in my head all day. I too wanted to roll melodiously out of God's hand. And now goodnight.

MONDAY MORNING, 9 O'CLOCK. Come on, my girl, get down to work or God help you. And no more excuses either, no little headache here or a bit of nausea there, or I'm not feeling very well. That is absolutely out of the question. You've just got to work, and that's that. No fantasies, no grandiose ideas and no earth-shattering insights. Choosing a subject and finding the right words are much more important. And that is something I have to learn and for which I must fight to the death: all fantasies and dreams shall be ejected by force from my brain and I shall sweep myself clean from within, to make space for real studies, large and small. To tell the truth, I have never worked properly. It's the same with sex. If someone makes an impression on me, I can revel in erotic fantasies for days and nights on end. I don't think I ever realized how much energy that consumes, and how much it is bound to detract from any real contact. Reality does not chime with my imagination, because my imagination tends to run riot. That's how it was that time with S. as well. I had formed a fixed idea of my visit to him and I went there in a kind of rapture, leotard under my woollen dress. But everything turned out quite differently. He was matter-of-fact again and remote, and I instantly turned rigid. And the physical exercises weren't any good, either. When I stood there in my leotard, both of us looked as embarrassed as Adam and Eve after they had eaten the apple. He drew the curtains and locked the door, and his usual freedom of movement had gone and I would have liked to run away and weep, it felt so horrible when we were rolling about

ETTY

A DIARY 1941-43

'No books on this subject – not even SCHINDLER'S ARK – can touch us as deeply as contemporary accounts by people like Etty Hillesum'

IRISH PRESS

Etty Hillesum was born in Middelburg on 15 January 1914. She died in Auschwitz on 30 November 1943. As the dark night of Nazism descended upon Europe, she kept this extraordinarily moving diary. Already a huge bestseller on the Continent, it bears witness to Etty Hillesum's faith in life, even when surrounded by the vilest slaughter.

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