INTRODUCTION

BEGINNING OF THE SPIRITUAL QUEST

And I shall wield this slender fountain pen as if it were a hammer, and my words will have to be so many hammer strokes with which to beat out the story of our fate and of a piece of history as it is and never was before. Not in this totalitarian, massively organized form, spanning the whole of Europe. Still, a few people must survive if only to be the chroniclers of this age. I would very much like to become one of their number.1

Etty Hillesum, July 10, 1942

An introduction to the spiritual search of the young Dutch Jewish woman Etty Hillesum (1914–1943) and her diaries and letters cannot be a theoretical one, although her writings often demand philosophical reflection.2 Hillesum’s works are fragmented: they present an unfinished human story that ended as so many others, in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland. It is presumed that she died on November 30, 1943. A comprehensive study of her diaries and letters in light of her interrupted life and of her Jewish fate in the Shoah (the Holocaust)3 can only represent a suggestion of Hillesum’s exploration of human existence.

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1 E.T., 484. Het Werk, 511: En met deze slanke vulpen zou ik nu moeten zwaaien als was het een hamer en de woorden zouden even zovele mokerslagen moeten zijn, om te vertellen over een lot en over een stuk geschiedenis, zoals het er voor dien nog niet was. Niet in deze totalitaire en massaal georganiseerde en geheel Europa omspannende vorm. Er moeten toch een paar mensen overblijven om later de kroniekschrijvers te zijn van deze tijd. Ik wil graag zo een klein kroniekschrijfsterje zijn later.


3 Etty Hillesum was one of the many young Jewish victims of the ‘Holocaust’ or ‘Shoah’: the deliberate destruction, murder and systematic extermination of approximately six million European Jews by the Nazis (led by Adolf Hitler) and their accomplices between 1933 and 1945. If one includes in this genocide the systematic annihilation of other groups such as the ‘gypsies,’ homosexuals, the ‘disabled,’ Jehovah’s Witnesses, prisoners of war, Polish and Soviet civilians, and other political and religious opponents such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the total number of Holocaust victims is possibly between 11 million and 17 million people. The biblical word ‘Shoah’ (שׁוּאָה), ‘Shoa’ or ‘Shoa’, means ‘calamity’. The Hebrew term is preferred by some Jewish and non-Jewish writers to that of the ‘Holocaust’,...
An intensive analysis of Etty Hillesum’s life and writings must take into account that there is a whole genre of prison camp memoirs and accounts of suffering within the totalitarian abyss. As I have elaborated in a previous work, her shared suffering with millions of others not only helps us empathize with her but also evokes a deeper understanding of our comparative research of Hillesum and her contemporaries. If one forgets this context, one might get lost in theory and analysis and thus lose sight of the very concrete circumstances within which Hillesum lived and had to express herself.


5 Coetsier, Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence, 122–123. Hillesum’s oeuvre is part of a wide array of spiritual writings, accounts of the interior life that signify remarkable transformations. There are testimonies given by those who lived to tell the tale. Viktor Frankl is one of them, and so are the two thinkers of this study Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas (see chapter 3, 4, 5 & 6). Hillesum is found among those Holocaust diarists, chroniclers, and writers who did not survive. Her personal testimony shares the legacy of resistance with Edith Stein, who was murdered in Auschwitz in 1942; Simone Weil, who starved herself in London in 1943; Anne Frank, who died of starvation and typhus in Bergen-Belsen in 1945; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged in 1945 in Flossenbürg (see chapter 7 & 8). They all call our attention to introspection, dialogue, and writing as a mode of resistance, charged as it is with flowing presence. They share the divine-human struggle and determination to survive the dehumanization and destruction of the Holocaust. Some of the attempts to bear witness during the actual occurrence of horrific events failed, but this was not the case for the literary legacy of Stein, Weil, Frank, Bonhoeffer, and Hillesum. Cf. Rachel Feldhay Brenner, Writing as Resistance. Four Women Confronting the Holocaust: Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Anne Frank, Etty Hillesum (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 3–11.