CHAPTER SIX

THE FACE OF THE OTHER: LEVINAS AND HILLESUM

The infinite paralyses power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent. There is here a relation not with a very great resistance, but with something absolutely other: the resistance of what has no resistance—the ethical resistance.1

Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity

The previous chapter gives a brief summary of the life of Emmanuel Levinas. In this chapter we explore Etty Hillesum’s spiritual journey and evaluate her writings in the light of Levinas’s philosophy of “the Other” (l’Autrui, l’Autre).2 The approach is charged with a confrontation between

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1 TI/E.T., 199. TI, 217: L’infini paralyse le pouvoir par sa résistance infinie au meurtre, qui, dure et insurmontable, luit dans le visage d’autrui, dans la nudité totale de ses yeux, sans défense, dans la nudité de l’ouverture absolue du Transcendant. Il y a là une relation non pas avec une résistance très grande, mais avec quelque chose d’absolument Autre: la résistance de ce qui n’a pas de résistance—la résistance éthique.

2 The overall difficulty one may have with Levinas’s writings is the use of the French symbols Autre, autre, Autrui, and autrui. To make it even more complicated: Levinas is not always consistent. Adriaan T. Peperzak writes that among Levinas scholars it has become a convention to reserve “the Other” with a capital for all places where Levinas means the human other, whether he uses Autrui, autrui, autre, or Autre. This convention, however, may have some inconveniences. It cannot show the difference, for instance, between Autre when it is used to refer to God and when it refers to the human other. “It also blurs the difference between ‘the Other’ as Autrui (or autrui) and l’Autre in the sense of to heteron as opposed to ‘the Same’ (to auton).” Nonetheless, despite its difficulty to stay close to Levinas’s original work in French, I have attempted to follow in this study Levinas’s own unsystematic way of capitalizing Autre and Autrui. Occasionally, it may be difficult therefore to indicate the difference between Levinas’s terms l’autre or l’Autre and autrui or Autrui, both of which I have translated as “the other” or “the Other.” There are a few places where Levinas’s approach may lead to a number of difficulties, “especially when Levinas, after having analyzed the opposition between the Same and the Other in an abstract sense, states the thesis that the Other (l’Autre) is Autrui. Here Autrui cannot be translated by “the Other” because “the Other is the Other” would miss the point completely.” In this and similar sentences one may well translate Autrui or autrui by “the human Other” or “the human other.” BPW, xiv–xv. Cf. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999); To the Other: An Introduction to the
two creative Jewish writers, in order to try to re-evoke the grounding experience of each of them respectively and so to be in a position to compare the nuances between each of the two thinkers. The challenge to say anything concerning Levinas in relation to Hillesum is precarious.\(^3\) It is daunting first of all because it is undertaken within a study which includes contrasting thinkers such as Bonhoeffer and Buber. Their subject matter and their references are “a deep, European, education in themselves.”\(^4\) In trying to sketch some of the main features of Levinas’s approach for Hillesum scholarship even this modest aim is not without its dangers. Clearly, it is impossible to do justice to Levinas or to any of these major thinkers in one brief chapter. Indeed, one cannot enter upon the adventure of reading Hillesum in the context of Buber, Levinas, and Bonhoeffer without instantaneously feeling oneself in the presence of thinkers of extraordinary subtlety, originality and complexity.

Through the lens of Levinas’s writings this study examines the philosophical, spiritual and ethical questions pertaining to Hillesum’s diaries and letters. There is an intriguing overlap in the themes to which Levinas and Hillesum devoted much of their intellectual energies—God, the Bible, the Other, time, existence,\(^5\) among others—and although their audiences and purposes differed in many ways, they came to similar end points by different roads. Whereas Hillesum addressed herself largely to God, her friends and the wider human community, Levinas spoke to his colleagues in university departments of philosophy, Jew and non-Jew alike. Hillesum spoke of her experiences, her spiritual life in horrific circumstances; Levinas emphasized human experience in which all action and knowledge were subordinated to ethical decisions. In their works, both relied on texts drawn from biblical sources and reflected upon their personal experiences. Both saw the study of human affairs as central to the continuity of upholding the dignity of the human person. Hillesum provided a philosophical and spiritual “framework” or “matrix” for contemporary

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\(^4\) Hand, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 2. To read Levinas involves having to read and recognize, among others, the force of the Bible and Plato, Descartes and Shakespeare, Hegel and Kierkegaard, and Bergson and Proust.