Each time we study Etty Hillesum and the writings she left us, we must ask ourselves: what exactly is it we are studying? Are we studying the diaries and letters that have been preserved or are we studying Etty Hillesum the person? Or to put it differently: Does the narrator in her writings truly coincide with Etty Hillesum the person? If not, then we must set about our task of studying these writings differently than were we to study Etty Hillesum the person.

I believe that a study of Etty Hillesum’s writings does not necessarily coincide with a study of Etty Hillesum the person and the historical circumstances of her life, although there are, of course, many links between the two subjects of study. The study of Etty Hillesum’s writings falls under the study of literature, an investigation into the character of Etty Hillesum under psychology, and an examination of her historical life circumstances to historiography. Moreover, theology and women’s studies each have their own line of inquiry.¹

To make the essential distinction between literature and reality even more clear in the case of Hillesum’s writings, we will look at a text that she wrote on 12 July 1942 about a jasmine bush growing in the garden at Gabriel Metsuistraat 6, a bush she could see from her desk:

The jasmine behind my house has been completely ruined by the rains and storms of the last few days; its white blossoms are floating about in muddy black pools on the low garage roof. But somewhere inside

¹ See my article “Invalshoeken in het onderzoek naar de nagelaten werken van Etty Hillesum,” Praktische Humanistiek 9 (1999), 1, 52–58.
me the jasmine continues to blossom undisturbed, just as profusely and delicately as ever it did.²

This text is the sequel to several earlier texts about this jasmine bush.³ The image of the jasmine bush whose blossoms have blown away serves as metaphor for the fate of the Jews in occupied Europe. According to Johanna Smelik, who knew Etty Hillesum quite well, her friend had little interest in nature. Etty had eyes only for books. Johanna thought that Etty wrote this passage to venture down a literary path, and not from any fascination with the wasted beauty of this bit of nature. If this is correct, we should analyze this text as a literary creation and not as evidence for any outstanding love of nature that Etty Hillesum is to have had. In reality, she was not a nature-lover; yet in this passage she uses the fate of the jasmine as metaphor for the fate of her people. Literature is not the same as reality—not even in a diary.

_Ideological Orientation_

Certainly when addressing the theme ‘Etty Hillesum and her God,’ there is a very great temptation to make statements about Hillesum’s religious life while silently tiptoeing past the distinction between literature and reality. Still greater is the temptation to integrate Etty Hillesum in one’s own religion or philosophy. This is a very characteristic development in the reception of her work.⁴ That is why we will start by looking at this phenomenon.

Some of her readers assert without the least reticence that Etty Hillesum became a Christian during the war. She is even listed, without further ado, in a book of twentieth-century Christian martyrs.⁵ Authors with this tendency like to compare Etty Hillesum to Edith

² E.T., 489. _Etty_, 517: De jasmijn achter mijn huis is nu helemaal verwoest door de regens en stormen der laatste dagen, haar witte bloesems drijven verstrooid in de modderige zwarte plassen op het lage dak der garage. Maar ergens in mij bloeit die jasmijn ongestoord verder, net zo uitbundig en teder, als ze altijd gebloeid heeft.


⁴ Cf. Ria van den Brandt, “Etty Hillesum en haar ‘katholieke vereerders’: Pleidooi voor een meer kritische benadering van een bijzonder document,” in: _Etty Hillesum in facetten_, Etty Hillesum Studies 1, eds. Ria van den Brandt & Klaas A.D. Smelik (Budel: Damon, 2003), 57–75, and her contribution in this volume.