In her diary, Etty Hillesum shows a wide cultural interest and a strong
literary ambition: many writers, poets, literary critics, philosophers,
composers and artists are named, quoted or obliquely mentioned.
Amongst the many names, two attract attention because of their fre-
quency: Rainer Maria Rilke and Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky.
The former is so often mentioned that in the index of the complete
edition no number is given, only passim. And it is true that Rilke’s
poems and thoughts run through Hillesum’s work like a Leitmotif.

Hillesum’s second favourite author is Fyodor Dostoevsky. His name,
or that of one of his works, is mentioned 35 times in her diary and
letters.¹ This puts Dostoevsky before the Bible, which is mentioned 33
times.² In spite of the prominent presence of Dostoevsky in Hillesum’s
work, little research has been done on her relationship to Dostoevsky.
This is a remarkable gap in the wide range of studies on Hillesum’s
spiritual relationship with thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Eckhart,
Seneca, who are far less often mentioned in her works, or not at all,
and with contemporaries or fellow sufferers, such as Dietrich Bon-
hoeffer, Simone Weil, Anne Frank and Edith Stein.

Recently, an article was published on the influence of the Dos-
toevsky interpreter, André Suarès, in Hillesum’s diary.³ However, it
treats the theme indirectly and is more about Suarès than Dostoevsky.
In my article, I want to investigate the position of Dostoevsky in Hille-
sum’s work and the relationship between her philosophy of life and
Dostoevsky’s spirituality, as expressed in The Brothers Karamazov. First,

¹ This number is different from that in the Index to Etty as nine mentions of novel
titles and characters without Dostoevsky’s name are not included in the Index.
³ Ellen Vandewalle, “De invloed van André Suarès’ Dostojewski in de dagboeken
van Etty Hillesum,” in: Etty Hillesum in context, Etty Hillesum Studies 2, eds. Ria van
however, I must present the context in which to place Hillesum’s love for the Russian author and Russia in general.

*Slavonic Studies*

The fact that Etty Hillesum had a particular interest in Russia has two likely sources: her mother, Rebecca Bernstein, was Russian (born in Pochep [Почеп]) and, after completing her law studies, in 1939 Etty Hillesum turned her attention to Slavonic studies. Because Hillesum’s father was Dutch, it is unlikely that much Russian was spoken at home, although Louis Hillesum, a classicist, had developed some interest in Russian after his marriage: together with his wife and daughter he followed literature courses on Pushkin in Russian in Amsterdam. On the other hand, a mother naturally talks to her child in her native tongue, and Etty Hillesum must have learned elementary Russian from her mother: “Had quite a respectable conversation in Russian with Mother […]”4 She also knew enough Russian to give private lessons while studying. Etty Hillesum did not begin her Slavonic studies without preparation.

Since she chose a second study, and was not driven by economic necessity, it is clear that this was a considered choice. At the time, Slavonic studies could only be pursued in Leiden as a main subject and in Amsterdam as a subsidiary one. Etty Hillesum attended lectures in both places. There was a world-famous, much loved Slavonic scholar in Leiden, Professor Nicolaas van Wijk, with whom Etty Hillesum studied Old Church Slavonic. She had great difficulty with this subject which traditionally is the most difficult part of Slavonic studies: “But now: Church Slavonic […] For months I have been sitting there just staring at it, and whenever I finally make up my mind to take up that old Bulgarian once more, I get something like a lump in my throat […]”5 Nevertheless, her motivation was so strong that she travelled to Van Wijk’s house in The Hague every week for months.

Nicolaas van Wijk’s sudden death on 21 March 1941 made a devastating impression on Etty Hillesum, who devoted four pages in her

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5 E.T., 11. *Etty*, 12: Aber jetzt: kerk-slavisch […] Maandenlang zit ik er tegenaan te kijken en als ik me voorstel nu eindelijk dat oud-Bulgaars weer eens ter hand te nemen, dan krijg ik zoiets als een krop in m’n keel en hartkloppingen […].