WRITING AND WITNESSING
ETTY HILLESUM:
A PORTRAIT OF A HOLOCAUST ARTIST

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The new definitive English edition of Hillesum’s writings is undoubtedly a major contribution to the study of the Holocaust. More specifically, it is an important addition to the study of the Jewish victims’ responses to their personal experience and to history at large. The pertinence of Hillesum’s diaries and letters to the study of the Holocaust became clear to me several years ago. Then I was working on my book Writing and Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust in which I included a discussion of Etty Hillesum. The new book presented me with a full picture of Hillesum’s ethical philosophy, her psychological insights, her struggle as an artist, and her historical outlook; it reinforced and deepened my former impressions of her uniqueness.

There are many facets to Hillesum, and it is impossible to encompass the richness of her personality in one article. The focus of my discussion is Hillesum’s evolution as an artist, and more specifically, her evolution as a thinking writer, a writer with a well-examined, thoughtful message to the world. Hillesum’s growth as a thinking artist evolved in two stages and roughly in two places. The first stage, which I call the stage of preparation, took place in Amsterdam; at this stage, she prepared to face the reality of the ultimate destruction through self-exploration as thinker and artist. The second stage, which I call the stage of the test, began with Hillesum’s first departure for Camp Westerbork. In the reality of the deportation camp, Hillesum put to test both her ethical perspective and her art she had been striving to shape in defiance of the increasing Nazi terror.