ETTY HILLESUM: “ÉCRITURE FÉMININE?”

Denise de Costa
(’s-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands)

I shall become the chronicler of our adventures. I shall forge them into a new language and store them inside me should I have no chance to write things down.¹

Écriture féminine (‘feminine writing’) is closely related to lecture féminine (‘feminine reading’). Both concepts have not so much to do with being a woman, but with a libidinal economy. Hélène Cixous, famous for her alternative literary theories, distinguishes two economies (masculine and feminine), two ways of living, greedily or generously, which can be practiced by any human being and which influence, among other things, the way one reads and writes.

In this contribution, I shall use the critical works of Hélène Cixous to find the connection between the ‘new language’ of which Etty Hillesum wrote and the response to her diaries and letters. Many people were clearly conscious of the originality of her writing.² The frequent response of ‘being deeply touched’ by Hillesum’s work is striking. The question of ‘how does the text affect me?’ is both the foundation and the core of Cixous’ approach to literature.

The aim of the international congress ‘Etty Hillesum: her letters and diaries’ at Ghent in 2008 had everything to do with research. I am very grateful to the Etty Hillesum Research Centre, part of the University of Gent, who brought us together and made it possible for us to listen to each other’s lectures, to discuss problems and solutions related to our research of Etty Hillesum’s work and to inspire one another in future endeavours.

¹ E.T., 510. Etty, 540: Ik zal de latere kroniekschrijfster worden van onze lotgeval- len. Ik zal me in mijzelf een nieuwe taal tezamenmeden en ik zal haar in mij bewaren, als ik niet de gelegenheid zal hebben iets neer te schrijven.
Although most of us had a more or less academic background, probably our first introduction to the work of Etty Hillesum was not academic at all. We read her diaries and letters and were impressed by their authenticity, as was the Dutch literary critic, Kees Fens:

The writer cannot be pigeonholed. The originality and intensity of her life and her thinking are so great that in the end, she leaves us puzzled. From quite a few angles, many people will be able to find quotations to support their own points of view, but those are contradicted elsewhere. Despite her religious personality, and her obviously great religious literacy—she repeatedly quotes the Bible and Saint Augustine—she ultimately cannot be categorized. She did not design a doctrine, nor did she write a philosophy. She wrote herself. She essayed herself on the empty pages of her diary, which is so personal that the reader cannot but feel embarrassed every now and then.3

In my opinion, a more scholarly approach to the work of Etty Hillesum must be seen in the context of this important reading experience. However, traditional literary theory does not suffice. Traditionally, theoretical and scholarly thought has revolved around the question ‘what is?’ This question was aimed at revealing the essence, the truth, the core of the matter. Traditional interpretation strives for rationality, non-ambiguity and accuracy.

Cixous and Modern Literary Theory

Modern literary theory holds different notions. Reading is no longer a non-contextual, neutral activity, with the reader in the role of a well-trained operator, decoding what is objectively presented in the text. Quite the reverse: meaning is not a static thing anchored in the text but a dynamic process evolving from the reader’s engagement with the text. In this type of reader-response theory, the emphasis is no longer on the text as such; instead, attention is turned to the process that takes place between the reader and the text. In other words: modern literary theory prefers the reader’s encounter with the text. The question ‘How does the text affect me?’ is both the foundation and the core of Hélène Cixous’s approach to literature. She is