

**“It Is Possible to Suffer with Dignity”: A Critical Reinterpretation of
Resistance in Etty Hillesum’s Diaries**



Etty Hillesum, 1940. The Jewish Historical Museum, The Netherlands.

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“To think that one small human heart can experience so much, oh God, so much suffering and so much love, I am so grateful to You, God, for having chosen my heart, in these times, to experience all the things it has experienced... Give me a whole life to comprehend it all.”¹

– Etty Hillesum

Esther (Etty) Hillesum was born in the Netherlands on January 15th, 1914, to Levie Hillesum and Riva Bernstein. She was the eldest of three children; her younger brothers Jacob and Micheal were also given nicknames: Jaap and Mischa. The Hillesum family moved around quite a bit in Etty’s childhood, though they settled in Deventer from July 1924 on. In grade school Etty studied Hebrew and, for a short time, attended the meetings of a Zionist youth group. After completing grade school, Etty went to Amsterdam to study law. In University, Etty was associated with left-wing and antifascist student circles, though she did not belong to any particular political party. Etty took her Bachelor’s exams in 1935 in Amsterdam, at the time living with her brother Jaap. In March of 1937 she took a room in the house of an accountant, Hans J. Wegerif at Gabriël Metsustraat 6. Hans, a widower, took Etty as his housekeeper though the two also began an affair. Etty took her master’s exams in Dutch public law on the 23rd of June and the 4th of July of 1939. The German army would invade the Netherlands in less than a year. While Etty studied Slavic languages, following in the footsteps of her father—a classical languages scholar and teacher—the war prevented her from completing her studies: though she gave private lessons until it was no longer possible. Most of Etty’s diaries were written in her room on the Gabriël Metsustraat in Amsterdam where a Stolperstein now commemorates her life.

Etty began her diary on the 8th of March 1941, one day after she began her therapy with psychoanalyst Julius Spier. Spier quickly became Etty’s friend, and soon after, her lover. In her diaries, Etty refers to him as ‘S.’ Given her initial address to him in the first entry, it is likely that Etty began the diaries in response to his recommendation. The month

¹ Etty Hillesum, *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941–1943* (William B. Eerdmans, 2002), ed. Klaas A. D. Smelik, trans. Arnold Pomerans, 514.

just before, February of 1941, the pogroms in the Netherlands had in earnest begun. The National Socialist Movement intensified their campaign, inciting antisemitic riots in Amsterdam. Following a general strike to support the Jewish population, the Germans at the end of the month, having been waiting for pretext, descended on the Jewish quarter.² When Etty began her diary, brutality against the Jewish people had quickly increased. Her existence was shaped by Nazi threat, and yet Etty's diaries deal very little with the topic of war. Her writings open with the details of her desire for Spier—whom she had met late January or early February of the same year—her captivation with him, at first, and her budding love. Etty, writing at her desk from which she could see a bush of blooming jasmine, saw a great deal of beauty in the world. As the war intensified, however, Etty's writing became more self-reflective, and while she did, still, examine the flowers, she more principally contemplated their evocations within her. Etty's diaries represent the initiation of this self-examination. They document the development of one woman's thoughts, fears, and dreams. Her diaries cannot speak for an entire Jewish collective; her writings cannot exemplify their pains. Out of a sense of moral obligation, Etty did offer herself to be a chronicler of the Holocaust,³ though rather than capture its horrors, the desolation and dismemberment, Etty concentrated on the soul: the one thing which physical violence cannot quite grasp, if we are so lucky.

Etty's diaries are rife with love and longing, forgiveness and acceptance. She is gentle and, I think, afraid, but always looking for solace and successfully finds it in writing. Between 1941 and 1943, Etty filled ten exercise books which now make up 550 typed pages of the English edition *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum*. This published, translated version of her diary is the central primary source I consulted in my writing on her. There are gaps in Etty's diaries, from July 29th of 1942, for example, until September 15th,

² Jacob Presser, *Ashes in the Wind: The Destruction of Dutch Jewry* (Wayne State University Press, 1988), 51.

³ Authors have their own preferred terms for the Final Solution or war against the Jews. Regardless of my own preferences or tendencies, in this paper I accept the term "Holocaust," being the common term in English, primarily for its use as a reciprocal tool which reveals and is revealing. For this reason, again, I will refer to the Holocaust capital H and always with the article 'the.'

as Etty was in the transition camp Westerbork during this time. Given her association with the Jewish Council, Etty was for some time *gesperrt*, meaning she was exempt from deportation to the death camps and was occasionally allowed special privileges to travel back to Amsterdam.⁴ Etty had applied to the Council in mid-July of 1942 per the recommendation of her brother Jaap after she received a call-up for Camp Westerbork.⁵ However, reflecting on this soon after, Etty wrote that her application had upset her “equilibrium” as it felt “underhanded.”⁶ Etty was accepted, initially, in an administrative position, though within a month became a social worker in Westerbork. July 1942 saw the first mass deportations of Jews from Amsterdam to the camps.⁷ The Jewish Council was forced to collaborate with deportations in the years 1942-1943, evoking some negative reactions to Etty’s involvement. Etty, however, had either foreseen these controversies or herself felt conflicted or anguished, writing on July 28th of 1942 that nothing could atone for the collaboration and that “history [would] pass judgment in due course.”⁸ On the 29th Etty went to Westerbork voluntarily. As a social worker in Westerbork, Etty saw herself as offering spiritual support to those in danger. While Etty’s role in the Council allowed her a status ‘above’ others in the camps, Etty emphasized her desire to share in what she called the *Massenschicksal*: the common fate of the Jews.

Etty’s last exercise book, number eleven, was written after spending August in Westerbork. Etty’s diaries conclude on October 13th of 1942, as she returned to the camp and remained there, by in large, until she was deported to Auschwitz.⁹ Etty, still *gesperrt*, did return to Amsterdam on a few occasions. During one of these such visits in December of 1942, Etty became ill. While Etty was home from Westerbork for this short period, her

⁴ Etty’s participation in the Jewish Council is relevant to assessing critical interpretations of her agency and innocence, though this is beyond the scope of my work in this paper.

⁵ Jan Geurt Gaarlandt, “Context, Dilemmas, and Misunderstandings During the Composition and Publication of *An Interrupted Life: Etty Hillesum’s Diary, 1941–1943*,” in *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: Proceeding of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008*, ed. Klaas A. D. Smelik et al. (Brill, 2010), 372.

⁶ Hillesum, *Etty*, 491 (Tuesday, 14 July [1942]).

⁷ Presser, *Ashes in the Wind*, 143.

⁸ Hillesum, *Etty*, 511 (Tuesday, 28 July [1942]).

⁹ Hillesum, *Etty*, 549 (Tuesday, 13 October [1942]).

friend Klaas Smelik and his daughter Johanna offered Etty a place to go into hiding.¹⁰ Under the floorboards of their villa was a crawl space, tall enough for a person to stand and practically impossible to find. Etty, however, refused, insisting that Klaus Smelik did not understand her and that she wanted to share the fate of her people.¹¹ Klaas Smelik Jr. became a scholar and ultimately founder of a research center in her name, later publishing on Etty in a collection of essays. In his work he writes that his father and sister had “understood that Etty Hillesum would not voluntarily go into hiding,” and “devised a plan to abduct her against her will.”¹² This was one of many plots to have Etty escape the death camps, though she consistently resisted. In this, Etty was determined. Finally, on June 5th of 1943, Etty was well enough to return to Westerbork, and went back to the camp the very next day. Etty, when she left for Westerbork, gave eight notebooks to her friend and housemate Maria Tuinzing, asking her to pass them on to another friend, Klaas Smelik, so he might be able to get the diaries published.¹³ Though there is debate surrounding whether Etty knew for certain she was going to die, evidently she believed it possible she would not return to add to the collection and to herself seek publication of her work. One month after Etty returned to Westerbork an end was put to the special status granted to personnel at the Westerbork section of the Jewish council. On September 7th, 1943 the Hillesum family was deported to Auschwitz where they were murdered.¹⁴ A Red Cross Report states that Etty died on November 30th, 1943.¹⁵ Etty was 29.

Throughout this paper I refer to Etty by first name. There is a practical aspect to this choice for use in distinguishing Etty from the other members of her family and from the

¹⁰ I will refer throughout this paper to Klaas Smelik, Etty’s friend, and his son Klaas Smelik junior, as such, though the junior Smelik writes on Etty extensively now simply as Klaas A. D. Smelik. My decision here is simply for practicality and ease of understanding.

¹¹ Klaas A. D. Smelik, “To Remember is to Act,” in *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context: Writings, Life, and Influences of a Visionary Author*, ed. Klaas A. D. Smelik et al. (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 34.

¹² Klaas A. D. Smelik, “Etty Hillesum’s Choice Not to Go Into Hiding,” in *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context: Writings, Life, and Influences of a Visionary Author*, ed. Klaas A. D. Smelik et al. (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 83.

¹³ Denise de Costa, *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: Inscribing Spirituality and Sexuality* (Rutgers University Press, 1998), 176.

¹⁴ Etty’s brother Jaap did survive Auschwitz but died on his way back to Holland when he was freed.

¹⁵ Jan Geurt Gaarlandt, “Introduction” in *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941–1943*, ed. Jan Geurt Gaarlandt (Pantheon Books, 1983), xiii.

“Hillesum family” collectively, whom I make occasional reference to. I admit, however, that I feel as if I know Etty. There is nearly a century between us, and yet, to read her unabridged diaries is to spend a great deal of time with her. It is to see her days pass as she writes indicating morning, noon, and night. It is to see her in love and in mourning, to see her grappling with the purpose of life and of death. It also is to see her reconcile her sense of self as an individual with her sense of herself as a Jew—something I find myself contemplating often as the fate of the Jewish people in the world again, though, as always, seems fraught. I do not believe myself to understand Etty entirely. Rather, I recognize that I likely cannot and, in some paradoxical and roundabout way, then think I know something more fundamental about her. That is, I recognize that deep separation between us and do not attempt to reach across it: something her critics and, at times, her reverents, work desperately to do. To use her last name would feel, however, too formal, as it is her inner life and emotions which most interest me as a Jewish woman just a few years her junior. What resounds most in her diaries is the salience of Etty’s self-conception, and the penetrability of her soul. Etty, in interrogating so intensely the potential of death, develops a sort of religious sensibility, addressing God often throughout her diaries and with a great familiarity, as if she finds Him most easily within her.¹⁶ “Truly, my life,” she writes, “is one long hearkening unto my self and unto others, unto God. And if I say that I hearken, it is really God who hearkens inside me.”¹⁷ In honesty, I was led to her diaries in a search for myself, and I, much like Etty, find myself nearly everywhere and easily did in her. On September 5th of 1941 Etty wrote, “perhaps I identify too much with everything I read and study.”¹⁸ Perhaps I do the same. We must, she says, defend God’s “dwelling place inside us to the last.”¹⁹ I feel myself drawn to defend her dwelling place for her, perhaps to affirm it for myself.

¹⁶ Spier introduced Etty to St. Augustine, who in his *Confessions* theorizes the self as figuratively dimensional such that it could become a house for God to reside within. Much of Etty’s discussion of her relationship to God appears in alignment with this Augustinian notion of the self.

¹⁷ Hillesum, *Etty*, 519 (Thursday, 17 September [1942]).

¹⁸ Hillesum, *Etty*, 93 (Friday, 5 September [1941]).

¹⁹ Hillesum, *Etty*, 589 (Sunday, 12 July [1942]).

Etty's diaries, when they were published, evoked quite disparate though expectedly strong reactions. These responses derive primarily from Etty's choice to go to Westerbork rather than escape or go into hiding, as well as her general willingness to suffer, and the discussions of fulfillment, even happiness, which pervade her work. Given her somewhat shocking acceptance of the "Jewish fate," Etty's diaries have often been reduced to their purely textual proverb, the reviews focusing on this particular decision and its legitimacy or ethicality. As postwar analyses of the Holocaust and the 'behavior' of its victims tended to degrade both their weakened psychological state and ostensible physical passivity, positing that the Jewish people went "like a sheep to be slaughtered," some critics recognized the potentially dangerous implications of Etty's so-called 'self-destructive' tendencies for the larger Jewish community. Though boundless evidence has since emerged of Jewish resistance to the Nazis, Hillesum's diaries are not, without close analysis, particularly useful in disproving this stereotype. While investigating her writings, one does encounter a method that Etty formulated for internal resistance, the ubiquity of the "sheep to the slaughter" narrative and the desperation to refute it led critics to denounce Etty's her compliance with this narrative, and, therefore, for abandoning the Jewish cause and colluding with antisemites postmortem. For others, Hillesum's diaries, as they demonstrated the capacity for spiritual growth and the strength of the human spirit, inversely functioned to disprove those same assertions that the Holocaust victim was mentally degraded in the face of death. In this light, Etty seemed a martyr, unmarred and unafraid—an exemplary victim, elevated above others for her compliance with ideals of heroism and salvation. Both of these perspectives, however, reduce Etty's life to her death.²⁰ To truly understand Etty's diaries, one must be able to see them as revelatory of process: sometimes more of a story than a moral, indicative of the discursive uses to which fear or victimhood may be put.

²⁰ Ria van den Brandt writes at great length on Etty's posthumous integration into the Catholic faith, see: Ria van den Brandt, "Etty Hillesum and her 'Catholic Worshipers': A Plea for a More Critical Approach to Etty Hillesum's writings" in *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008* (Brill, 2010), ed. Klaas A. D. Smelik et al., 215–31.

“The Passive Activity of Genuine Suffering”

Etty, born in 1914, lived her first years of childhood in the midst of war. While the Netherlands remained neutral in the first World War, there was no one truly unaffected by it. Early in the diaries Etty recalls the war, the “rebelliousness,” the extent of “hatred, the passion, the arguments,” with a melancholy sentimentality.²¹ Considering her emotional state now facing war again, Etty admits to being “cushioned from the outside world,” and poses to herself quite candidly, “I often wonder why this war and everything connected with it afflicts me so little.” Musing on this, she offers, “perhaps because it is my second great war? I was in the thick of the first, and then relived it in all the postwar literature... To go through it a second time just won’t do.”²² Born already into a world responding to conflict, the scale of which never before seen, Etty grew and studied in its wake only to meet another. Death seeming, to her imminent, her life shadowed by the specter of war for so long, Etty refuses for her life to be reduced from its richness. Her diaries, as they chronicle her spiritual growth, represent this determination. While the diaries do not contain many explicit references to the war, Etty’s silences are themselves reflections. Still, Etty does not deny the suffering she sees around her, and neither does she dissociate from it. In fact, Etty formulates a method for integrating this suffering with all of the good she sees in the world, so that she is able to bear it. “We suffer most by playing hide and seek with suffering,” she says, by assuming ourselves able to avoid it and allowing it to sneak up and shock us.²³ Unable to find a sense of safety in the world, Etty evidently focused on her own capacity to cultivate a sense of security within herself. Quoting from André Suarès’ *Dostojevski*, Etty records and reiterates, “pain is not the site of our longing but the site of our certainty,” something which, if one accepts, they can thus maintain a degree of control over. Etty is clear that she does not believe herself to be a masochist: she does not go in search of

²¹ Hillesum, *Etty*, 181 (Sunday, 14 December [1941]).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Hillesum, *Etty*, 183 (Monday, 15 December [1941]).

suffering, nor does she, again in the words of Suarès, “look upon pain as perfection.”²⁴ Etty, rather, sought joy, and worked tirelessly to create a life in writing where she could find it.

Early in the collected diaries, on March 17th of 1941, Etty begins to write about her rejection of a pessimistic attitude, transcribing a quote written by Spier which, she says, she would have once thought “a very nice passage to read,” but had, by this time, truly “migrated from [her] head to [her] heart.”²⁵ Two pages are missing from Etty’s diaries before the excerpt, and the context is thus unclear. However, the quote from the diary is inserted as such, shown in full:

Being angry and dissatisfied is being unproductive; to suffer genuinely is being productive because our dissatisfaction, our anger, reflect active passivity while genuine suffering reflects passive activity. The active passivity of dissatisfaction involves resistance, rebellion against what is unalterable and so paralyzes man’s other powers. The passive activity of genuine suffering involves bearing and accepting what is inalterable and this releases new powers.²⁶

Offering the concepts “active passivity” and “passive activity,” Hillesum proclaims to practice, or at least to attempt always to practice, the latter. This passive activity was crucially characterized by an internal and preservationist method of resistance which involves an acceptance of that which cannot be changed and a mobilization of what she could control—which figured to be her spirituality and her ‘self’: the bounds of which were mutable as she derived personal and spiritual fulfillment from giving herself over to others in her romantic, sexual, familial, and communal relationships. Crucially, this concept, of “passive activity,” consistent with Etty’s continued theories of Jewish resistance throughout her diaries, relies on an acceptance of suffering and, further, a ‘mastery’ of it. The “passivity” of which Etty speaks in fact requires skill and composure. While she goes on to encourage the Jewish people as a whole to adopt this attitude, to an extent Etty recognized this to be a personal process, expressing pride in herself for her growing strength in the face of

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Hillesum, *Etty*, 27 (Monday, 17 March [1941]).

²⁶ Ibid.

struggle.²⁷ Etty, forced to contend with death, discerned for herself a method not to be destroyed by it while she still lived.

Etty mobilized the concept of “passive activity” as she later went voluntarily to Westerbork, and then again when she refused to go into hiding. Evidently there were people in Etty’s life who both feared her passing and did not understand her choice. In July of 1942, Etty responds to the criticism she received, stating,

Many accuse me of indifference and passivity when I refuse to go into hiding; they say that I have given up. They say everyone who can must try to stay out of their clutches, it’s our bounden duty to try. But that argument is specious... And the funny thing is, I don’t feel I’m in their clutches anyway, whether I stay or am sent away... I don’t feel in anybody’s clutches; I feel safe in God’s arms... I may face cruelty and deprivation the likes of which I cannot imagine even in my wildest fantasies. Yet all this is as nothing to the immeasurable expanse of my faith in God and my inner receptiveness... and my acceptance is not indifference or helplessness.²⁸

While Etty understood that others perceived her to be passive, indifferent, or despondent, she clarifies that she doesn’t feel this way at all. Further, Etty expresses that she does not feel that she is, or even would be, in the clutches of the army if she were in the camps given her attention to the preservation of her spiritual self and her relationship to God. Soon before Etty voluntarily left for Westerbork she wrote, “we must help You [God] and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last... There are those who want to put their bodies in safekeeping but who are nothing more now than a shelter for a thousand fears and bitter feelings.”²⁹ For Etty, it would be worse to lose an inner sense of herself, and therein lose the residence for God within her, than to experience physical “cruelty and deprivation.” Etty aspired to maintain this spiritual freedom through it all, writing that, no matter how much cruelty they inflict, the Nazis “forget that no one is in their clutches who is in [God’s] arms.”³⁰ Further, Etty reveals that to suffer is not to be degraded. “Suffering,” she says, “is not beneath human dignity. I mean: it is possible to suffer with dignity and without.”³¹ Etty, though she may be willing to suffer, does resist attacks on her dignity and her humanity.

²⁷ Hillesum, *Etty*, 37 (Saturday, 20 March [1942]).

²⁸ Hillesum, *Etty*, 487 (Saturday, 11 July [1942]).

²⁹ Hillesum, *Etty*, 489 (Sunday, 12 July [1942]).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Hillesum, *Etty*, 459 (Thursday, 2 July [1942]).

Etty makes clear throughout the diaries, however, that she does not want to die. In fact, she articulates clearly wanting to “live through everything,” in order to serve her purpose as a chronicler.³² And yet, she has already been made acquainted with death, and feels as though, rather than running from it, she must “accept it as it comes.”³³ For Etty, death is simple. “You don’t have to have any profound thoughts on the subject,” she says, for “there death suddenly stands, having slipped simply, unmistakably and almost silently into... life.”³⁴ Having accepted that death is entwined with the fact of life, Etty moves, sometimes, towards it, out of a sense of moral necessity. On July 28th, just before Etty would, for the first time, leave Amsterdam for Westerbork, she writes that she is, still, constrained by her human desires, “tied by a thousand threads to everything [she] treasure[s]” at home. However, Etty proclaims, “each moment I move forward from my dependence on external props and draw closer inwardly to those whom I cannot be separated from no matter how far apart we happen to be.”³⁵ Etty’s turn to her interiority allows her to preserve these bonds and these memories, to “store everything inside,” so as to be able to take these things with her when she goes.³⁶ Though Etty’s attachments are strong, she feels such a necessity to package these things to be able to be present in Westerbork for the people there. Etty writes of Hans, of her “poor little parents,” and of Spier, whom she recalls saying, “you must not go from me, you must stay.”³⁷ And yet, Etty, preparing to assume her role at Westerbork, resolves that she must be prepared for her “project,” writing as if a reminder to herself, “wherever you happen to find yourself, be there with your whole heart. If your heart is elsewhere, you won’t give enough to the community in which you happen to be.” Etty prepared herself for the possibility of death and retired from “guessing about the duration of the war,” so as to be able to be present with the people whose pain she shared: to be able to soothe them, and herself, whatever the outcome.³⁸ Though she did not resist death, in this

³² Hillesum, *Etty*, 508-9 (Tuesday, 28 July [1942]).

³³ Hillesum, *Etty*, 184 (Monday, 15 December [1941]).

³⁴ Hillesum, *Etty*, 464 (Friday, 3 July [1942]).

³⁵ Hillesum, *Etty*, 486 (Saturday, 11 July [1942]).

³⁶ Hillesum, *Etty*, 508-59 (Tuesday, 28 July [1942]).

³⁷ Hillesum, *Etty*, 508 (Wednesday, 27 July [1942]).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

sense she is able to resist the dehumanizing and demoralizing effects of Nazi rule. Just as Etty voluntarily goes to Westerbork in the hopes of providing support to the Jewish people in suffering, Etty's later choice not to go into hiding appears principally related to her consciousness of a transport/deportation quota. Almost as soon as Etty begins writing on her choice to share in the *Massenschicksal* of the Jews, she expresses concern that evading orders for her transport would only result in another innocent Jew going in her place.³⁹ Further, seemingly anticipating survivor's guilt, Etty writes, "I don't think I would feel happy if I were exempted from what so many others have to suffer." While she reveals that many people have told her she "has a duty to go into hiding," because she has "so much to give," Etty insists that "it is sheer arrogance to think oneself too good to share the fate of the masses."⁴⁰ Etty, having readied herself to bear suffering, opens herself to it so as to be with her people, to be with her God. "I must try to live a good and faithful life," she wrote, until "my last breath: so that those who come after me do not have to start all over again."⁴¹

Etty the Shepherd: An unceasing effort to herd together her thoughts

On the 6th of July, 1942, when the destruction of the Jews, to Etty, seems imminent, she muses on the fate of the Jewish people. "Death," she says, even when "gloom and abominations are its trappings... is a gentle slipping away."⁴² Though Etty did not desire death, she did not fear it. A potential release from the looming threat from which she saw no moral escape, death would be gentle, that is, compared to what else she saw herself set to lose. The worst thing, she wrote, "will be when I am no longer allowed pencil and paper to clarify my thoughts—they are absolutely indispensable to me, for without them I shall fall apart and be utterly destroyed."⁴³ Writing was Etty's oasis, the place where she most readily confronted her deepest fears, her truest feelings. However, aware of herself living through

³⁹ Hillesum, *Etty*, 484 (Friday, 10 July [1942]).

⁴⁰ Hillesum, *Etty*, 487 (Saturday, 11 July [1942]).

⁴¹ Hillesum, *Etty*, 462 (Friday, 3 July [1942]).

⁴² Hillesum, *Etty*, 476 (Monday, 6 July [1942]).

⁴³ Ibid.

the destruction of the Jewish people, Etty also hoped to assume the responsibility of chronicler, preserving for others the methods she used to preserve her sense of dignity and self.⁴⁴ When Etty went to Westerbork she had asked for her diaries to be brought to a publisher. Knowing that she might die, Etty hoped for something to live on. Her diaries represent a continuation of a life, a life interrupted, though not a life unlived. Etty could not edit these texts, or decide exactly what she would have liked for us to see. Still, as if communicating to an audience, often speaking in the third person to herself as if reading from another perspective, Etty expresses regular frustration at her inability to express her emotions to the fullest extent. Perhaps, as writing was a passion of hers and a fundamental outlet, Etty was frustrated by her inability to translate into writing her feelings as a matter of craft. I would think, however, that Etty wanted her diaries to be read, and wanted to be understood.

Though Etty often struggled to sufficiently express her feelings in writing, Etty is ever persistent and does not suppress herself in this effort. Thus, in the diaries themselves, however, Etty herself cautions against universalizing her perspectives and assigning to others her unique experience. In writing of her reconciliation of and ability to accept both good and evil, Etty writes “sorrow and joy...the jasmine behind the house... the unspeakable horrors – it is all as one in me, and I accept it all as one mighty whole and begin to grasp it better, if only for myself.”⁴⁵ Etty was evidently aware that her experience was not universal: that her acceptance of the “sorrow and joy” all as one may have been for herself only.

Though subtly, throughout the diaries Etty acknowledges the interiority of her growth and the individuation of her experiences. For fear of being misunderstood she also tends to preface her more controversial statements, explaining that, as much peace and clarity she senses in herself, in communicating “on paper” she often will “make a mess of it.”⁴⁶ In other

⁴⁴ Etty later in the diaries, that is, when she is going to Westerbork, writes that she is determined to serve as a chronicler, as the “thinking heart of the barracks.” These entries, however, come soon before Etty went to Westerbork and then was deported to Auschwitz. It does not seem that Etty believed her earlier entries to be “chronicling,” so to speak, and it is unknowable whether Etty believed herself to have, in fact, fulfilled what she refers to as her “purpose” in these diaries.

⁴⁵ Hillesum, *Etty*, 461 (Friday, 2 July [1942]).

⁴⁶ Hillesum, *Etty*, 152 (Sunday, 23 November [1941]).

cases, she explains that it is a “struggle to wrest some form out of the chaos inside, which I am not yet ready to tackle.”⁴⁷ Etty, in writing every day, often introduces ideas she is not yet certain of how to articulate. In reading the diaries one can observe the development of a concept as Etty writes something one week, and then, incorporating similar phrases, presents a developed and fulfilled argument later on. Etty’s mind, as such, was sometimes estranged from her writing, the page not quite capturing the sentiments inside. The jasmine had always been behind Etty’s house, always as vivid and beautiful. “That jasmine,” she says, “words fail me when it comes to that jasmine. It has been there a long time, but only now are words beginning to fail me about it.”⁴⁸ Faced with the genocide of her people, how could she write of the beauty of jasmine? And how could her soul survive if she did not?

In beginning her diaries, Etty had reservations. In her second entry, Etty discusses the “sense of shame” she felt “allowing things to pour out” from her; though she asserts she “must do” this in order to give her life “satisfactory purpose.”⁴⁹ Thus, though she later assumes the role of “chronicler,” determined to document the complexities of the moment in which she wrote, from her first entry to the very last, Etty explains that the diaries are fundamental for her personal and spiritual growth, and crucially, for her survival. Thus, Etty acknowledges the diaries’ “melodrama,” as she herself calls it, and the almost compulsive internal analysis of every feeling and thought. However, Etty herself acknowledges in the very first pages a dissonance between her literary skill or coherence in writing and her internal emotional turmoil. She writes on the very first page: “at times I am nothing more or less than a miserable, frightened creature, despite the clarity with which I can express myself.”⁵⁰ Etty, always remarkably articulate, may have been less sure of herself than excerpts have her seem. Though she does not express any notable degree of doubt in her own perceptions, she does acknowledge that her writing represents her own internal processes and also an evolution: meaning that her perspectives were open to change. Etty, embarking

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Hillesum, *Etty*, 459 (Wednesday, 1 July [1942]).

⁴⁹ Hillesum, *Etty*, 4 (Sunday, 9 March [1941]).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

with Spier on a journey of psychoanalysis, appears to be untangling the “tightly wound ball of twine” which “binds” her, often attempting primarily to discern her thoughts for herself before communicating to an audience.⁵¹ This activity is what sustained her, and what offered her hope through it all. Etty’s diaries are, therefore, ambiguous at times, complex, and even contradictory. This opacity must be preserved: in it is her humanity.

Etty most often mentions the dissonance between her expressions and her inner sense when discussing her will to share in the common fate. Etty, given that she received criticism also from her own close friends regarding this desire, contemplated these critiques throughout her diaries, and often expressed frustration in her inability to have others understand. In July of 1942 she wrote: “When I tell others, fleeing or hiding is pointless, there is no escape, so let's just do what we can for others, it sounds too much like defeatism, like something I don't mean at all. I cannot find the right words either for that radiant feeling inside me, which encompasses but is untouched by all the suffering and all the violence.”⁵² Etty was aware both that her writings on the Jewish fate appeared defeatist, and that the “radiant feeling” within her was difficult to encapsulate and to describe. She was certainly correct in insighting that her work would sometimes appear to be something she didn't mean at all. Etty, knowing this, worked to clarify her meanings constantly, and was also quite hard on herself. In late July of 1942, Etty writes that she has begun to read some of her older entries, and scolds herself for writing such “schoolgirlish nonsense,” referring, most likely, to the extensive entries detailing her near obsessive desire for Spier which she later felt cool. “I've felt,” she admits, “like tearing everything up.” She resolves, however, to keep these entries, writing, “I thought I ought to keep it... as a means of getting in touch with my old self later on.”⁵³ Reading Etty's diaries means coming into contact with her deepest secrets and sometimes, her regrets. And still, these have been offered to us. Etty, discussing her process of writing, offers this:

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Hillesum, *Etty*, 483 (Friday, 10 July [1942]).

⁵³ Hillesum, *Etty*, 507 (Monday, 27 July [1942]).

Yesterday afternoon I knelt down... and tried to entice my thoughts and feelings which were raging before and all around me like wild hordes/herds, back into the confines of my innermost inner self... Herding together the disorderly flock of your thoughts, emotions, sensations, experiences, reactions—please let me for once hit upon the right word that expresses it all. Like the good shepherd.”⁵⁴

Herding together her feelings and thoughts, desperate to be the “good shepherd” and courageous enough to share with us all this from the confines of her innermost self, Etty is begging us to be gentle with her.

“Still not ripe”: Etty’s Path to Publication

Soon after the war had ended, Maria Tunizing contacted Klaas Smelik. She had for him a bundle of Etty’s diaries along with a series of letters she had sent from Westerbork. Smelik could not decipher Etty’s sprawling handwriting which filled page after page, as if nothing could stand not to be said. Smelik’s daughter, Johanna, however, could read Etty’s writing and transcribed a sample to send to publishers.⁵⁵ While Smelik approached various publishers throughout the 1950s, he was turned down by every one of them. German author Denise de Costa writes that she investigated the letters from publishers to Klaas Smelik, which are held in the multimedia center of the Jewish Historical Museum (along with much of Hillesum’s legacy including her diaries, pictures, and letters to, from, and regarding Hillesum—such as these regarding publication of her diary) though the letters gave no indication to the reason for rejection.⁵⁶ Costa, however, spoke to Smelik junior, whose father disclosed to him that “publishers were not interested in Hillesum’s work because it did not contain enough horror.”⁵⁷ In a 2018 anthology of essays on Etty, *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context*, Smelik junior elaborates that publishers rejected the diaries because they were too philosophical. “The war,” he says, “was being commemorated,” not analyzed.⁵⁸ Etty’s suffering, as she often intellectualized her pain and her struggle, could not always clearly be seen. “People wanted to hear about atrocities,” he said. They did not want “an appeal for love

⁵⁴ Hillesum, *Etty*, 194 (Saturday, 20 December [1941]).

⁵⁵ Smelik, “To Remember is to Act,” 36.

⁵⁶ de Costa, *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum*, 254.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Smelik, “To Remember is to Act,” 36.

and reconciliation.”⁵⁹ Smelik junior recalls the last time his father sought publication of the diaries, in 1965. The time, he says, was “still not ripe,” as if it were time which needed to be prepared to receive Etty.⁶⁰

In the years immediately following the Holocaust, local populations infamously treated returning Jews quite poorly, marginalizing the extent of Jewish death.⁶¹ Although Jewish survivors themselves gathered to understand and to document the tragedy of the Holocaust, the European public discourses primarily addressed resistance to National Socialism as an abstract political concept without mentioning or taking into account the distinct victimization of the Jewish people.⁶² Many early Holocaust texts focused on the extent of destruction, investigating how the German army was capable of committing such crimes, while Etty’s diaries were entirely concentrated on the protection of Jewish personhood and the safety of the human spirit in the midst of war. The emphasis on investigating abstractions of facism rather than its effects meant that generally, Holocaust survivors were not entrusted with the objectivity which would have verified their accounts, and attention was directed away from the victim to the perpetrator. In the immediate postwar period survivors thus undertook a project which was primarily self reflective. Demeaned in the public sphere, they built networks amongst themselves. Laura Jockusch, in *Collect and Record!* reveals that these early chroniclers, as they worked to document their traumatic experiences, in fact “touched upon some of the major phenomenological and methodological problems that have preoccupied Holocaust researchers until the present day.”⁶³ These chroniclers crucially introduced the use of ego-documents from Jewish victims, such as diaries, along with letters, memoirs, and autobiographies. Although these early survivor accounts were able to integrate more complicated frameworks for thinking through

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁶¹ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (Penguin Press, 2005), 23.

⁶² Carolyn J. Dean, *The Moral Witness: Trials and Testimony after Genocide* (Cornell University Press, 2019), 92. The Jewish postwar project to document the Holocaust in the immediate postwar is described at length by Laura Jockusch, see: Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record!: Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶³ Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record!: Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 9.

the concept of resistance—which would make way for Etty’s diaries—their insights would not enter the academic study of the Holocaust until the 1980s and 90s.⁶⁴ Thus, despite these complex interrogations, survivors active in official “historical commissions and documentation centers were aware... that such sources had value for historical research only if collected in a critical mass; moreover, such testimonies,” would be “read against each other,” and evaluated for consistency with one another and perpetrator documents.⁶⁵ Analyzing the early outpouring of Holocaust survivor testimonies, Australian researcher Margaret Taft notes that early testimonies tended to express “personal grief and anguish within an all encompassing metanarrative, one that directly addressed the great crime committed against them all.”⁶⁶ The experiences of individuals, she asserts, had to co-exist with those of the collective in a sort of “double-consciousness,” where little divided personal accounts from the public record.⁶⁷ Thus, in legitimizing the Holocaust as a crime against the collective of Jewish people, personal narratives were subsumed and sometimes obscured.

There were, of course, texts from Holocaust victims which were being published in the postwar period, though they were typically accepted only if they did not destabilize this metanarrative. In 1947 *The Diary of a Young Girl*, commonly referred to as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, was published. Anne Frank, like Etty, also lived in Amsterdam and, though many years younger, she similarly had literary aspirations and emphasized the importance of maintaining a kind and gentle spirit. Both diaries, as well, engage the Holocaust obliquely, focusing primarily on personal growth and development. Anne Frank’s diaries were crucially written while she was in hiding, her personal development foregrounded by the fact of her confinement. When the diaries were published, her father approved deletions of passages regarding her menstruation and sexuality; though these were fundamental to her

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 9–10.

⁶⁶ Margaret Taft, *From Victim to Survivor: The Emergence and Development of the Holocaust Witness, 1941–1949* (Valentine Mitchell, 2013) 72.

⁶⁷ Taft, *From Victim to Survivor*, 72.

coming of age, publishers had rejected the diaries for their sexual references.⁶⁸ Anne Frank's diaries had to be sterilized for publication. Her sexuality may have threatened her apparent 'repression,' by disturbing her identity as an adolescent which, consequently, renders her subagential: naive, not yet developed, and therefore innocent, always. Etty, however, was not a girl but a woman. Etty's refusal to go into hiding appeared, given her womanhood and maturity, a lucid rejection of physical resistance. Etty's diaries directly express a sense of agency, an assertion over the conditions of her death and of her life. The sexual content of Etty's diaries further crystallize this assertion as Etty defends for herself the centrality of love in her life even amidst tragedy. Until the emergence of women's history as an academic discipline in the mid-1970s, women's experiences were almost entirely neglected in Holocaust scholarship, and even more repressed were women's experiences with sexuality under Nazism.⁶⁹ Scholar Joan Ringelheim writes that sexual analyses of life during the Holocaust "must integrate the overwhelming presence of death and must grapple with the awesome power that German authorities had over all people marked for annihilation."⁷⁰ Though potentially uncomfortable, none of these sexual expressions can be removed from their context. Just as Etty writes of the jasmine bush blooming just beyond her windowsill, though shadowed always with the genocide of the Jews, sexual expressions during the Holocaust confess that no pleasures are abstract. For Etty, the threat of death commingled with, and perhaps enhanced, her desire. Read together without sympathy for Etty's (perhaps impossible) endeavor to reconcile the world's beauties with its horrors, the presence of both on one page appears scandalous. Childhood, situated within a context removed entirely from the specter of sex, made the victimization of the innocent legible by allowing for retention of one's purity. However, the bulk of Etty's diaries, if not always explicitly sexual, are often erotic, with regular reference to her relationship with Spier. When they were

⁶⁸ Jeffrey Shandler, "From Diary to Book: Text, Object, Structure" in *Anne Frank Unbound: Media, Imagination, Memory*, eds. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jeffrey Shandler (Indiana University Press, 2012), 31.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth D. Heineman, "Sexuality and Nazism: The Doubly Unspeakable?" in *Sexuality and German Fascism*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (Berghahn Books: 2005), 23.

⁷⁰ Heineman, "Sexuality and Nazism: The Doubly Unspeakable?" 58.

eventually published, though it would have been near impossible to remove these passages, the sexual content within the diaries was extensively cut. For Etty's diaries to be published the time would have to ripen, and she, like Anne Frank, would have to be confined.

In the 1960s, though still constrained, the voices of Jewish people were slowly being allowed into mainstream discourses. Annette Wieviorka's work, which historicizes the official invocation of survivor identity internationally, identifies the Eichmann trial in 1961 as the moment which invoked the Holocaust survivor as witness and valorized Holocaust testimony in the public and political spheres.⁷¹ After the Nuremberg trials of 1945-46—wherein the United States commuted a majority of the sentences in an effort to guarantee the support of West Germany in the Cold War—the Eichmann trial of 1961-1962, conducted in Israel, redirected attention to the particular Jewish dimensions of the Holocaust by aiming to communicate the horrors of the Holocaust to an audience as well as judge Adolf Eichmann. While both the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials utilized film and photograph, the Nuremberg trials relied largely on documentation from the Nazi state while “the Eichmann case was based heavily on both written documents and oral evidence from victims—with the testimonies providing a living immediacy and embodied charge.”⁷² Shenker notes that survivor testimony crucially provided a “charge,” capable, unlike government documents, of illuminating the personal and emotional aspects of the tragedy. The integration of these written sources as evidence transformed the role of the Holocaust victim, and thus, the Holocaust diarist: their role in the public consciousness now principally political. The Holocaust victim, finally offered a voice in the public sphere, would play an active role in attaining justice for the Jewish people.

The connotation of the Holocaust witness as representative of direct confrontation and resistance became, at this moment, absolutely crucial to contradict claims by scholars who suggested that the Jews were complicit in their own deaths and, in extreme cases, participated in or condoned their own extermination. The Eichmann trial nearly coincided

⁷¹ Annette Wieviorka, “The Witness in History,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2006), 389.

⁷² Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* (Indiana University Press, 2015), 8.

with the publication of Bruno Bettelheim's 1963 *The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age*, which analyzed the behavior of the Jews during the Holocaust, though focused specifically on their experiences in the death camps.⁷³ Bettelheim was in the German concentration camps Dachau and Buchenwald for an approximate year total, spanning 1938 to 1939.⁷⁴ Bettelheim's first report on his time in the camps appeared in 1943, the year Etty was killed at Auschwitz. Following his liberation from the camps, Bettelheim was motivated to write a conclusive analysis of what he had experienced primarily because the "impact on the personality of prisoners" was "as yet unrecognized."⁷⁵ Bettelheim suggests in his book that, in an attempt to avoid punishment and conflict with the SS, the Jewish people resorted to "masochistic, passive-dependent, and childlike attitudes," for relieving aggressions. In doing so, he argues, the victims of the Holocaust adopted dispositions that fundamentally aligned with the Nazi objective to weaken and homogenize the Jews into "a docile mass from which no individual or group act of resistance could arise," thereby participating in their own extermination.⁷⁶

Bettelheim's thesis echoed criticism that the Jews had gone to their deaths "like sheep to the slaughter," invoking the Biblical passage Isaiah 53:7 where a servant is murdered without protestation. The term's original application to the Holocaust context was, in fact, by resistance fighter Abba Kovner from Vilna, Lithuania, who encouraged Jews to revolt against the Nazis and whose words inspired those in other ghettos to take up arms.⁷⁷ After the Holocaust, Kovner's words, in light of the massive destruction, were interpreted as a characterization of the Jews as passive, submissive, and self-destructive. Viktor Frankl brought the topic to the public with his 1946 book *Man's Search for Meaning*, which asserted that, as survival in the camps depended on one's ability to "retreat" from reality, those who

⁷³ Much of Bettelheim's work was discredited after his death due to fraudulent academic credentials and abuse of patients and students. Still, I invoke Bettelheim given his prominence at the time and, thus, his contributions to an ongoing conversation which, at the time of *Etty's* publication, would have been relevant.

⁷⁴ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age* (The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 13.

⁷⁵ Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart*, 107.

⁷⁶ Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart*, 109.

⁷⁷ Richard Middleton-Kaplan, "The Myth of Jewish Passivity" in *Jewish Resistance Against the Nazis*, ed. Patrick Henry (Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 6.

fared best in the camps were, paradoxically, “of a less hardy make-up.”⁷⁸ Frankl and Bettelheim, along with Raul Hilberg and Hannah Arendt were those among prominent voices understood to have allocated partial responsibility for the Holocaust to the Jews themselves. In the early 60s both Hilberg and Arendt, in her widely-read account of the Eichmann trial, wrote on what they observed to be a shortage of resistance, implying that the Jewish tendency for passivity was ultimately liable for the deaths of so many Jews. Though Arendt later clarified that the issue, in her eyes, was the passivity of the whole world rather than just of the Jews, according to journalist Amos Elon, “no book within living memory had elicited similar passions,” as *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and Arendt’s perspectives had already affected global perceptions of the Holocaust victim.⁷⁹ That the Jews had gone to their deaths like sheep to the slaughter became a dominant paradigm.

Extensive accounts of Jewish resistance to the Holocaust had been recorded throughout the 1940s and 50s, and books such as K. Shabbetai’s *Sheep to the Slaughter? The Myth of Cowardice* and Yuri Suhl’s *They Fought Back* emerged throughout the 1960s. Still, the tendency to blame the Jews for their own murder became pervasive, and later texts, such as George M. Kren and Leon Rappoport’s 1980 *The Holocaust and the Crisis of Human Behavior*, continued to assert that the Holocaust victim had—though unintentionally—participated in his own extermination. Expanding on Bettelheim’s analysis, Kren and Rappoport challenge the concept of innocence, implying that in retaining a marker of moral purity, the Jews condemned themselves to death. The Jewish people’s identification with victimhood, according to Kren and Rappoport, caused them to concentrate on “bending every effort toward correction” of the Nazi’s perception of Jews, thereby ignoring “what it means to be a victim”—that is, to be actively victimized, the target of violent action. Kren and Rappoport argue that, focused on the status of themselves as innocent victims, Jewish people failed to raise “the questions that require consideration if one is to survive in the role of victim,”

⁷⁸ Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Washington Square, 1984), 55–6.

⁷⁹ Amos Elon, “Introduction: The Excommunication of Hannah Arendt” in Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, ix, xix.

therefore positing that “the fact that one is innocent... works against adoption of effective action because of fear that such action may contaminate... one’s primary claim to innocence.”⁸⁰ Citing Elie A. Cohen’s 1953 *Human Behavior in the Concentration Camps*, they assert that the feeling of being innocent “weakened the energy that was essential for survival.”⁸¹ For Etty, however, accepting what she believed to be her fate, the fate of the Jewish people, did not weaken her energy. The method she developed for resistance, she asserts, in fact allows for “new powers” to be released, and prevents one from being paralyzed.⁸² Though Etty did hope to live, and hoped for the end of the war—occasionally referencing the possibility of intervention by the English army—she accepted the possibility of her death so as to best serve her people.⁸³ “I think what weakens people most,” she says, “is fear of wasting their strength.”⁸⁴

Answering these allegations of guilt and collusion and following the Eichmann trial, the Holocaust survivor undertakes a commitment to bear witness: that is, to reveal the truth. Holocaust testimony, as such, was in this moment tied up with witnessing—legitimate, honest, witnessing, at that, which accurately represented the “reality” of Holocaust to a global audience. The Eichmann trial, as it functioned not only as evidence of Eichmann’s crimes, but as legitimation of the Holocaust itself as a crime against the Jewish people, summoned the witness to serve a ‘higher’ purpose in exemplifying the suffering of the Holocaust as a whole phenomena. Witnessing the Holocaust was thus not only about one’s personal experiences in and observations from the period, but about one’s capacity to provide tangible evidence of the terror and assign culpability; the witness became, in a sense, prosecutor. This role was absolutely crucial to Holocaust survivors who were confronted with assertions that the Jewish people were themselves responsible, to some degree, for their own victimization, and many mobilized this capacity of assigning

⁸⁰ George M. Kren and Leon Rappoport, *The Holocaust and the Crisis of Human Behavior* (Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1980), 75.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁸² Hillesum, *Etty*, 27.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 508.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 535.

culpability in order to deflect these allegations. This capacity, after the extensive denial and marginalization of Jewish pain, became an objective for all Holocaust literature: Holocaust “witnessing,” extended as well to memoirists and diarists whose works were seen as “evidence” to be presented of the Holocaust in various contexts. The witness in the era after the Eichmann trial was expected both to convict the perpetrator and exonerate the Jew. Etty, ever gentle, slow to assign blame to others and quick to bear all the burden herself, does not fulfill this request.

After years of repeated rejection, Klaas Smelik had given up on reaching out to publishers. The diaries sat in the left hand cabinet of his desk. Smelik junior recalls the stories his father told him in his childhood about Etty’s refusal to go into hiding and of the hostile look in her eyes when he attempted to bring her to safety.⁸⁵ Though these stories had been fundamental to the Smelik family, Etty’s diaries remained unpublished. That was, until 1979 when Smelik junior met Dutch publisher J. G. Gaarlandt who mentioned to Smelik that he was interested in the philosophical questions which emerged from the war.⁸⁶ Captivated by Etty’s diaries, Gaarlandt accepted the manuscript. Gaarlandt describes the “fascination” and “shock” he felt upon reading the first few lines, wherein he was quickly convinced that he was “about to publish one of the most important documents” of his time.⁸⁷

The diaries were first deciphered and transcribed—despite Etty’s “difficult” handwriting, described in humorous depth—and Gaarlandt began what he called the “painful task” of making selections from the 400 some pages for publication.⁸⁸ Though a “faithful admirer” of Hillesum’s work, Gaarlandt worried that publishing the unabridged diaries of an unknown woman would be too great a risk as the diaries might not “receive proper notice” or end up “in used bookstores.”⁸⁹ Given his determination to “produce a book that stood a good chance of being carried by bookstores and reaching a certain number of

⁸⁵ Smelik, “To Remember is to Act,” 33.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁸⁷ Gaarlandt, “Introduction,” xiii.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Gaarlandt, “Context, Dilemmas, and Misunderstandings,” 368.

readers,” Gaarlandt was drawn to capitulate.⁹⁰ Still, he declares that he strove to “convey the contents of the exercise books as carefully as possible,” primarily “taking out repetitions” and “quotations.”⁹¹ These repetitions, however, are fundamental for capturing the spirit of Etty’s diaries. In reading her unabridged diaries and recognizing these iterations, I could discern Etty’s fixations and fears. Her tireless revisions are fundamental not because they culminate in clarity, but because they illustrate her desperate attempts at expression, and confess that these attempts were not always fruitful. In removing repetitions for publication, Gaarlandt admits that he sped up her life by evading this process wherein Etty engaged in dialogue, or monologue, searching for herself.⁹² Etty’s urge “to think everything through to the extreme,” he assures, eventually “found a place” in the unabridged diaries, published in Dutch five years after *An Interrupted Life*.⁹³ However, the collected edition of Etty’s diaries primarily drew those who were already Etty’s fans. Further, though Gaarlandt does not directly address this, in the collected diaries Etty engages much more thoroughly with sexual themes than is conveyed in the original publication. This omission, I propose, was in large part to legitimize Etty’s inclusion alongside Holocaust texts of the time which emphasized a universal condition of victimhood, and of innocence. Gaarlandt, therefore, also made significant efforts to distort Etty’s attention to the war. While in the unabridged diaries, Etty directly referred to the war in about thirty places throughout, Gaarlandt admits that in composing *An Interrupted Life*, he “intentionally and deliberately included as many references to the war as possible in the diary,” making it one of his “explicit principles” to do so.⁹⁴ While *An Interrupted Life* includes far fewer of Etty’s passages on her relationship with Spier, there are an approximate equal number of direct references to the war in both the 200

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 367.

⁹³ The unabridged version was not translated into English until 2002.

⁹⁴ Gaarlandt, “Context, Dilemmas, and Misunderstandings,” 373. Comparing *An Interrupted Life* to the unabridged diaries, there are approximately the same number of references to the war despite the unabridged diaries being more than twice as long.

pages of *An Interrupted Life* and the near 600 pages of *Etty: Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*. Still, Gaarlandt added no words of his own.⁹⁵

The Dutch edition of *An Interrupted Life* was published by De Haan/Unieboek in 1981, with the English edition cited here following in 1983. The English edition was published by Pantheon Books, a house founded in 1942 by Kurt Wolff, who had come to the United States to escape the Holocaust, and his American wife Helen. Though by 1983 Pantheon had long been bought out by Random House and Wolff had long passed, it is notable that Pantheon published workers by thinkers such as Carl Jung, with whom Julius Spier trained, and whom Etty herself was inspired by.⁹⁶ Evidently, Pantheon was interested in the vein of psychoanalytic thought at the center of Etty's diaries and, though perhaps entirely coincidental, the history of Wolff's holocaust survival as well appears relevant in situating the Company's interest in publishing her work. In 1982, nestled between the releases of the Dutch and English editions of *An Interrupted Life*, Gaarlandt published a collection of Etty's letters under the title *The Thinking Heart of the Barracks*, which, on October 3rd, 1942, ten days before her final entry, Etty declared herself determined to be for the other inmates at Westerbork.⁹⁷

Martyr or Marred? Receptions of Etty's Diaries

A review of *An Interrupted Life* appeared in a Sunday issue of the New York Times, January 29th, 1984. The author, Terrence Des Pres, was an American Professor on the literature of the Holocaust at Colgate University and author of the 1976 book *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*. In the preface of this book, Des Pres expresses an interest in what mattered to and for survivors, and as such, was focused on testimony as indicative of the "ways of life" which arise from living in "a world ruled by death."⁹⁸ Though he acknowledges that stories from the Holocaust "can never be told completely or often

⁹⁵ Gaarlandt, "Introduction," xiii.

⁹⁶ Hillesum, *Etty*, 673.

⁹⁷ Hillesum, *Etty*, 541.

⁹⁸ Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (Oxford University Press, 1976), v.

enough,” Des Pres admits that he observes a “terrible sameness” in the “extensive” collection of testimonial texts.⁹⁹ In his review he notes, however, that Hillesum’s diaries do not resemble what Holocaust documents are “supposed to be,” that is, “artless,” in the sense of literary flair or intricacy, and “wounded,” brimming with tragedy and with pain. Des Pres, in response to Etty’s diaries, expresses admiration for a “spirit existing at all under such brutal and inhuman conditions.”¹⁰⁰ He assures that “to ask for... some growth or deepening of the soul in that time and those places—would be unseemly, even cruel,” and yet, he celebrates the “marvelous gift” of *An Interrupted Life*, artful—“written with the interior richness and woven design of a Jamesian novel”—and certainly not wounded, as Hillesum chronicles her extensive spiritual growth (which Des Pres says he has seldom seen anywhere, much less in an account from the Holocaust) and consistently notes her sense of fulfillment, even happiness, with death at her door.¹⁰¹ According to Des Pres, the diaries “[disturb] our notions of political resistance and physical survival,” as Hillesum neither fought nor survived, but “deserves to be counted among the heroes.” In his own work Des Pres distinguishes heroes from survivors, not to degrade survivors but rather to indicate an ushering in of an age wherein death is familiar, and constantly present. It is not just the heroes who encounter death and must contemplate it. The hero “takes upon himself the condition of victimhood,” and “chooses to find consummation in death,” thereby controlling “the condition for his fulfillment.”¹⁰² The survivor, in contrast, cannot make such an absolute choice, as it is “the fight to live and not the manner of dying which matters.”¹⁰³ Des Pres’s designation of Hillesum as a hero can thus be understood not just as indicative of intrigue or reverence, but in accordance with his theory of heroism, intimately entwined with one’s encounters with or inclination towards death. That Etty voluntarily went to Westerbork is, thus, central to Des Pres’ analysis of her supposed heroism.

⁹⁹ Terrence Des Pres, “Eros, God and Auschwitz,” *The New York Times*, January 29, 1984.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Des Pres, *The Survivor*, 5, 7.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 7.

Des Pres continually focuses on Etty's resolve and fortitude. Des Pres goes on to say that "Etty's diaries complete Anne's," noting the similarities in the somewhat pacifist tendencies in the writings of both women, "except that in Etty's example there is no room for pathos," that is, Etty's diaries, in contrast with Anne's, do not evoke pity.¹⁰⁴ That which distinguishes Etty from Frank most strikingly for Des Pres is in Etty's strength of mind and certainty, which places her among the ranks of "exceptional women."¹⁰⁵ Des Pres's differentiation between the two seems to rest on Etty's womanhood, and thus, her agency, contrasted with Anne Frank's youth. Etty, as a woman, was capable of discerning meaning and making choices for herself, crucially including choices regarding the conditions of her own death. Etty had an acute awareness of the threat of death, and when death came she possessed, perhaps, a sense of control over it, having appropriated her own murder and integrated it with a sense of herself as an actualized person and as a Jew. Des Pres writes that Etty "approached her fate deliberately," and was not "haphazardly crushed." Continually applauding Etty's philosophical revelations regarding life and love, Des Pres reminds readers that these have come, "remember, in the middle of a war."¹⁰⁶ For Des Pres, Etty far exceeded expectations for Holocaust victims, offering an unexpectedly "refined" portrait of the spirit in adversity.

Following Des Pres's review of *An Interrupted Life*, Dutch scholar and journalist Henriëtte Boas wrote a reply which appeared in *The Times* on March 18th of the same year. In her response, Boas contends to correct Des Pres's supposed ignorance, asserting that he "is not sufficiently familiar with the facts—a circumstance he shares with the multitude of non-Jewish readers of the Dutch edition who caused it to become a bestseller in Holland." Des Pres was in fact born 1939 in Effingham, Illinois, and was raised Catholic; a fact which certainly goes to support Boas's conception that it is non-Jews most enamored by Etty.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Des Pres, "Eros, God and Auschwitz."

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Terrence Des Pres, "The secondary witness: an interview with Terrence Des Pres," *Edited Programs – Fortunoff Video Archive*, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimony (May 3rd, 1980), 1:19–1:47.

According to Boas, the popularity of Etty's diaries can be attributed to an uninformed, and gentle, readership, who must have been drawn to Etty's work by the particular 'falsity' it contained. She further states that while "[Etty] is admired by a large number of non-Jewish readers in Holland, many of whom even consider her as something like a saint, most Jews I know do not share this high opinion but think her self-centered and somehow artificial and untruthful."¹⁰⁸ Boas was not the only Jewish scholar unwilling to accept Etty's diaries as illustrative of a "Jewish experience" of the Holocaust. In a 2004 article, David Patterson, a historian and professor at the Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies, writes responding to the general public's positive reception of Etty's diaries following the publication on *An Interrupted Life*, given that public opinion has regarded Etty's work as rivaling the diaries of Anne Frank. Patterson, like Boas, attributes these reactions to a primarily Christian audience, elaborating that Etty's writings were "more Christian than Jewish," noting that the publisher of the unabridged version of *An Interrupted Life* specializes in Christian books.¹⁰⁹ Alleging that Etty had little to no allegiance to or "consciousness of a Jewish community," Patterson further asserts that, given this absence, Etty's diaries do not qualify as Holocaust diaries. "The defining features of the Holocaust," according to Patterson, "are not merely historical but, more profoundly, metaphysical." Thus, texts classified within the genre of Holocaust literature must not only be located during and at the site of the genocide, but must fundamentally address "the meaning of *this* systematic murder of *these* people," as well as demonstrate a "consciousness of a Jewish community" through including "not only the consciousness of personal experience but the consciousness of communal ordeal."¹¹⁰¹¹¹

It is true that Etty seldom invoked a Jewish self-identification in her diaries. Lawrence Langer wrote of Etty that, "although she does not repudiate her Jewish identity, neither does she particularly acknowledge it," observing that "it lies uneasily on her

¹⁰⁸ Henriëtte Boas, "Voluntary Martyr?" *The New York Times*, March 18, 1984.

¹⁰⁹ David Patterson, "Through the Eyes of Those Who Were There," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18, no. 2 (2004): 285.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 277–8.

shoulders like a burden she might wish to discard.”¹¹² Certainly Etty’s spiritual growth incorporated aspects of Christianity, most notably the practice of kneeling to pray. Etty, however, identified in complete solidarity with Jewish suffering and, in that respect, always affirmed herself a Jew. Even her references to the “common fate” of the Jewish people confirm her Jewishness, and her ‘commonness’ as well, her belonging to the mass of Jewish people. Her decision not to go into hiding, also appeared to have been motivated primarily by a sense of responsibility to the Jewish collective, as Etty wrote that “everyone who seeks to save himself must surely realize that if he does not go another must take his place.”¹¹³ Etty knew that a life would be lost whether or not it was hers, and was too burdened by this knowledge to attempt at saving herself. Certainly, Etty’s comments regarding the responsibility of the Jewish people, even if not intended as such, intimated insult. On September 20th, 1942, Etty directly challenged the heroism of Jews who went into hiding, writing: “those Jews who go into hiding. They may say they’re doing it because they don’t want to work for the G., but it’s not nearly as heroic and revolutionary as that. All they’re doing is using a high-sounding excuse to dodge a fate they ought to be sharing with the rest.”¹¹⁴ Given that her own decision represented, to her, sparing another person’s life, inversely the choice to not go would have been a choice to spare oneself. Looking closely at the quote, Etty seems to primarily address those who go into hiding and then claim it to be an act of revolution, or heroism. Still, speaking of who will ultimately go to the camps, Etty says that it does not truly matter.¹¹⁵ Etty appears not to value one life above another and rather believed that one should spare a life by submitting their own, if one had the lucidity and capacity. It is not clear that she bore any true frustration with those who did hide or escape; simply, she would not have regarded these actions as heroic ones.¹¹⁶ Despite these striking passages, Patterson continues to undermine Etty’s work as an account of Holocaust,

¹¹² Lawrence L. Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 70.

¹¹³ Hillesum, *Etty*, 484.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 523.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 484.

¹¹⁶ Etty at no point refers to her own action as heroism either.

remarking on the diaries' lack of "major Holocaust themes" and Etty's failure to record important events such as Nazi invasion.¹¹⁷ Patterson is, as well, correct to note that the contents of Etty's diaries do not revolve around the war, and, as Gaarlandt recalled, there were only about thirty places where Etty explicitly references its events.¹¹⁸ Gaardlandt further wrote, in 2010, that "anyone who says that Etty Hillesum reflected minimally on the wartime situation is obviously correct."¹¹⁹ And yet, while Patterson claims that there are no "Holocaust themes," within Etty's diaries one sees something absolutely central: the resilience of the human spirit through struggle.

Though Etty's diaries reflect central questions regarding Jewish experience of and responses to the Holocaust, Boas seems determined to undermine Etty's account, specifically challenging the idea that Etty achieved martyrdom. Boas, responding to Etty's decision not to go into hiding, asserts that Etty "had little inkling of what was really to happen" in the camps and maybe did not—would not—voluntarily choose to die.¹²⁰ While Boas challenges that Etty did not truly know what fate would meet her in the camps—and it is perhaps true that the full extent of Jewish suffering in the camps may not have been knowable to those outside—certainly Etty understood, by the time of her final journey to Westerbork, the Nazi's intention to annihilate the Jews. In her ninth notebook, on July 2nd of 1942, Etty wrote of the Nazis: "What is at stake is our impending destruction and annihilation, we can have no more illusions about that. They are out to destroy us completely."¹²¹ Whether Etty was truly certain of her death, however, is arbitrary, as Boas further contends that Etty in fact "made every effort" to escape being sent to Westerbork and only "acquiesced" upon the realization that the efforts were in vain.¹²² Boas insists that Etty was dishonest in her journals, contending that "she never volunteered to accompany those who were doomed,

¹¹⁷ Patterson, "Through the Eyes of Those Who Were There," 277.

¹¹⁸ Gaarlandt, "Context, Dilemmas, and Misunderstandings," 373.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Boas, "Voluntary Martyr?"

¹²¹ Hillesum, *Etty*, 461.

¹²² Boas, "Voluntary Martyr?"

despite all her remarks to the contrary in her diaries.”¹²³¹²⁴ While Etty did apply to the Jewish Council upon being called to Westerbork, she almost immediately regretted this act of self-protection and did not again avoid deportation, quickly thereafter volunteering to go to the Camp. Boas, however, writes that Etty abandoned her family in transport to Auschwitz. Boas is correct that Etty attempted to defer her transport from Westerbork so as not to go with her family, however, Etty in fact made this decision out of care for them and not disregard. Etty wrote to a friend, Maria Tuinzing, on July 10th of 1943, admitting cowardice but saying that she could not stand to see her parents in distress and as such did not want to be transported with them. Tuinzing then wrote of the departure of the Hillesum family, affirming that Etty had chosen to ride in a wagon with strangers rather than with her family, reiterating that it was because she could not bear to see them suffer. These details appeared in Etty’s letters rather than her diary, and it is fairly possible Boas had not read them by the time she wrote this reply for Des Pres. Etty’s references in her diaries to the *Massenschicksal*, however, are constant, and she never ebbs in her decision to share in it. It would require an absolute skepticism to read the diaries and still assert that Etty had not in earnest intended to allow herself to die.

Despite Etty’s extensive explanation of her decision, at no point in the article does Boas accept Etty’s assertions as truth and *then* discredit her. Rather, she maintains an almost constant sense of disbelief, seemingly certain that the writing surrounding Etty’s decision to go to Westerbork is made up of lies—for how could anyone know the true horrors of the Holocaust and wish to face them? And yet, Etty seems absolutely resolute in her conviction. Perhaps Boas believed that if Etty truly understood what she stood to face, she too would have resisted. This was likely preferable to believe, for accepting that Etty knowingly chose to die appears to affirm Bettelheim’s thesis—that the Jews were weakened to the extent not

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ These details are investigated at length by Klaas A. D. Smelik—son of Klaas A. D. Smelik Senior, the man to whom Hillesum sent her diaries before she went to die. This discussion is supported by excerpts from Etty’s diaries along with letters amongst close companions regarding her decision. See: Klaas A. D. Smelik, “Etty Hillesum’s Choice Not to Go into Hiding” in *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context: Writings, Life, and Influences of a Visionary Author*, eds. Klaas Smelik et al. (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 81–102.

only of submitting to the Nazis, but to assisting them. Boas, born three years before Etty in Amsterdam—where Etty would reside from 1932 until she would go to Westerbork—belonged to a generation of assertive Dutch Zionists who emphasized Jewish persistence and valued assertiveness. Attempting to directly counteract conceptions of the Jewish as weak and as passive, Jewish historiographers have glorified the hiding, and later escape from occupied territory, of a group of young Dutch Zionists in 1942 as epitomizing Jewish resistance.¹²⁵ Raised regarding antisemitism as an ineradicable enmity from which only Zionism could offer reprieve, “resistance” according to this sect of Zionists indicated tangible external action, as contrasted with Etty’s internal fortitude.¹²⁶ For Henriëtte Boas, a Dutch Jew working tirelessly against claims that the Jews had gone passively to their deaths, Etty appeared, perhaps, a wolf in sheep’s clothing: as presented, her published diaries claimed to offer an account of the Holocaust, but the content of the diaries seemed, to Boas, to collaborate in the degradation of Jews as submissive. Her letter, notably, which answers Des Pres, addresses a non-Jewish man who has seemingly elevated Etty above other Jewish victims of the Holocaust, victims who may have desperately tried to survive. Though I find Boas’s assertions are easily refuted in analyzing Etty’s diaries, something in her earnest appeared, to Boas, dangerous, such that she had to denigrate Etty’s agency and reduce her influence over post-Holocaust perspectives on Jewish victims.

Patterson, as well, attempted to disjoin Etty’s testimony from Holocaust literature as a whole. Noticing the individual character of her work, as well as the tone of dissociative objectivity which, for Des Pres, was inspirational and dignifying, Patterson describes Etty’s role as chronicler as “voyeuristic” and “vicarious.” Thus, Patterson distinctly isolates Etty’s experience from that of the Jewish people and asserts that she cannot, and must not, serve as “a witness.”¹²⁷ Etty’s apparent detachment was potentially resultant from the editorial process wherein her repetitions were cut and her internal conflict was therein diminished,

¹²⁵ Piet Schrijvers, “Etty Hillesum in Jewish Contexts” in *Reading Etty Hillesum in Context: Writings, Life, and Influences of a Visionary Author*, eds. Klaas A. D. Smelik, et al. (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 328.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Patterson, “Through the Eyes of Those Who Were There,” 286.

however, Patterson, writing in 2004, would have had access to Etty's unabridged diaries, which were published in English in 2002. Even when the diaries were published in their entirety, however, there were efforts to circumvent them. Continually throughout the introduction to her unabridged diaries Klaas Smelik junior writes that Etty's marks in school were "not particularly worthy of note." Again, writing about her time in University, Smelik remarks that her "academic results were not striking."¹²⁸ Gaarlandt does not make such notes in *An Interrupted Life* where he characterizes Etty as being "witty, vivid, eager," and "far ahead of her school friends."¹²⁹ Gaarlandt paints a striking portrait of Etty's life, rich with love and emotion, Etty herself passionate, altruistic, and, crucially, steady and perceptive. This all ebbs, however, as the introduction to *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943* is purely discursive, describing Etty's upbringing and engaging very little with her writing's contents. Smelik's assertion of Etty's unexceptional performance, appears to be an attempt to undermine Etty's intellectualism given the negative responses to her diaries as a concession to critics such as Boas who themselves sought to undermine Etty's agency and lucidity. Patterson, unappeased, still seeks to diminish Etty's legitimacy with an accusation of voyeurism, which directly challenges her authority as a Jewish thinker. Patterson's demand that the Holocaust diarist offer testimony from a particular first-hand vantage point is conjoined with his disavowal of Etty as a "witness" as this illuminates his projection that the Holocaust diarist ought to operate, functionally, as such. According to Patterson, Etty is simply a "diarist" as opposed to a "Holocaust diarist," because she does not fill this role: she does not offer what Patterson supposes to be "the truth." While Etty describes herself as a chronicler of the Holocaust, Etty's diaries could not operate as a legible timetable of its events as the contents of her writing are not confined to the war. Though she does not adopt the lens Patterson may prefer, Etty is witness, always, through her own eyes. Her diaries chronicle her experiences and emotions, all had and felt throughout the war and bore from

¹²⁸ Klaas A. D. Smelik, "Introduction" in *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943* (William B. Eerdmans, 2002), ed. Klaas A. D. Smelik, trans. Arnold Pomerans, xii.

¹²⁹ Gaarlandt, "Introduction," x.

it. Etty's reflections are inseparable from their context, Etty writing up in her room on the Gabriël Metsustraat, occupying Nazis in the street below. Yes, Etty focused on the wealth of her life rather than what was stolen from it. Should we force Etty to bear a pain which should never have been inflicted upon her?

Patterson's rejection of Etty's diaries as 'Holocaust texts,' perhaps, can be understood as adjacent to that of the publishers who first rejected the diaries in the 1950s for their "lack of horror." In describing the ideal effect of Holocaust diaries and memoirs, Patterson says that "something in the soul of each of us... cries out," as "we realize that the tales of terror we receive are not only about them—they are about us."¹³⁰ A Holocaust diary is a Holocaust diary when it evokes this affective terror and fear. Yet, as Des Pres remarked of Etty's diaries in 1984, that in her work there is "no room for pathos." Reading them does not evoke the "stir in our bodies," or the disturbance of "our souls" which Patterson regards as so crucial to the act of consuming narratives from the Holocaust.¹³¹ Perhaps Patterson sees the objective of the Holocaust diary as inciting something akin to an Aristotelian notion of "tragic pleasure," as discussed by Hannah Arendt, "which makes one able to accept the fact that something like this war could have happened at all."¹³² "The tragic hero," in this case, the reader who engages with these texts, "becomes knowledgeable by re-experiencing what has been done in the way of suffering, and in this *pathos*, in resuffering the past, the network of individual acts is transformed into an event, a significant whole."¹³³ The reader, then, stirred to action, adopts this suffering—an act of heroism—for the purpose of addressing and tending to the harm. Patterson should like us to ingest these narratives as Eucharist: to take them in as parts of our selves, to attempt to bear the burden of what we have been entrusted.¹³⁴ For Patterson, the reader of a Holocaust diary implicates themselves, now responsible for carrying a certain weight. A failure to bear this weight, then, results in moral culpability, in

¹³⁰ Patterson, "Through the Eyes of Those Who Were There," 289.

¹³¹ Ibid., 289.

¹³² Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 20.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Patterson, "Through the Eyes of Those Who Were There," 289.

guilt. In this sense, Patterson asks the Holocaust narrator to bear witness as if in trial; The Holocaust victim as such ought to indict, discipline, and punish: Etty certainly did not.

Des Pres also acknowledges the reader's responsibility in interacting with Holocaust texts, though, as a non-Jew, he himself assumes the role of the 'tragic hero' or, as he calls it, the 'secondary witness,' defending Etty against insults by authors such as Bettelheim for whom Etty's actions would seem to substantiate claims of Jewish regression and submission to the Nazis. On May 3rd, 1980, four years before he would write his New York Times review of *An Interrupted Life*, Terrence Des Pres was interviewed for the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimony at Yale. Though Des Pres is not Jewish nor a Holocaust survivor, his interview is classified and included in the Fortunoff archive as "testimony." In the interview, titled "The Secondary Witness," he states that, "whoever listens to a witness takes on the obligation to pass the word," that is, they are a "secondary witness." Des Pres cites German-born American literary theorist Geoffrey Hartman, who drew the conclusion between secondary witnessing and complicity in a crime: here in Des Pres's words: "if you witness a crime and don't report it, you have collaborated in that crime."¹³⁵¹³⁶ Des Pres recalls his own moment of "secondary witnessing" in viewing Allied film footage from Dachau and Belsen where the soldiers dug and bulldozed the dead into pits. Des Pres says that he first saw this footage, shown at the Eichmann trials, when he was only six and did not yet know these people to be Jews; However, in encountering stories from the Holocaust, this image still haunted him. Of this footage and the bodies of the dead he says, stuttering, "I can, I can, I can always see these. They, they fall, they are falling on each other slowly, almost like a dance, and then they settle and more fall in."¹³⁷ Des Pres has seemingly been

¹³⁵ Des Pres, "The secondary witness," 0:34–0:47.

¹³⁶ Hartman would go on to write on Holocaust testimony and literature, notably in *The Longest Shadow: in The Aftermath of the Holocaust*, where he discusses the "second generation witness," referring to the child of a Holocaust witness. In a later paper "Shoah and Intellectual Witness," Hartman cites Des Pres along with Lawrence Langer as having expanded the term to "secondary witness" which generalizes the classification to all who are in touch with primary witnesses and have received their testimonies. The Fortunoff Video Archive, of which Des Pres is here a part, notably extends the capacity for secondary witnessing by allowing further generations to engage with first-hand witness testimony, even as the generation of Holocaust survivors pass away.

¹³⁷ Des Pres, "The secondary witness: an interview with Terrence Des Pres," 2:10–2:43.

emotionally affected by this footage, but also discusses being deeply touched by Holocaust testimony and the resonance of the beauty and heart ever present, even at Auschwitz where the Jews “managed to lose just less than everything.”¹³⁸ Certainly, Des Pres does adopt his place as a “secondary witness,” first impacted by distressing images of mass-death, though notably most struck by the persistence of the soul, hope, and kindness in the face of atrocity. While Des Pres applauds those who just “manage not to be crushed,” Etty’s spirit grew under the same horrific conditions. Perhaps, then, Des Pres assigns less responsibility to the primary witness as such, and more to the secondary witness who must carry this burden of knowing. Raised Catholic and, thus, an “outsider,” Des Pres may represent someone who has been called, or necessitated, to assume the role of the tragic hero, as he willingly bears the responsibility of carrying on advocacy and education for the Jews.

In his Fortunoff video archive interview, Des Pres does specifically reference Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Informed Heart*, and accuses him of denigrating survivors, noting in particular his assertion that the Jewish people regressed to infantile behavior or only survived by collaborating with the SS. These arguments, Des Pres says, did not align with his own interaction with Holocaust testimony.¹³⁹ Though by the time Des Pres encountered Bettelheim’s work he had not himself met a Holocaust survivor nor yet undertaken his 1976 scholarly project interrogating the complexities of survivor identity, he marks this dissonance—between Bettelheim’s assertions and his own “feeling,” he calls it, or instinct—as a major turning point in his own scholarship.¹⁴⁰ In short, Des Pres followed a particular instinct to disprove Bettelheim’s account of Jewish people in the camps because it appeared to him degrading. Des Pres’ work can be seen, largely, as a defense against these insults. Des Pres, already seeking to challenge Bettelheim’s derogation of Holocaust victims, found, despite the fact that she did not physically resist the Nazi’s commands, ample evidence of mental fortitude and internal resistance in Etty’s diaries. His review of Etty’s diaries, though

¹³⁸ Ibid., 7:25–7:56.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 8:58.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

noble, must be situated within this larger tendency as, in seeking to defend her, he has also made an exception of her, and to an extent elevated her above the ‘average’ Holocaust victim; which Boas may reasonably take issue with, though her criticism is misguided in being directed towards Etty rather than Des Pres. Though, perhaps, it could have been offered gently. Des Pres and Boas both grapple with Etty’s agency, or lack thereof, and its implications. In choosing to go to Westerbork, Etty, according to Des Pres is venerable as a hero because she takes upon herself the conditions of her victimhood and “chooses to find consummation in death.”¹⁴¹ In turn, however, he casts those unable to control the conditions of their deaths, such as those who were killed while resisting, outside of the category. Belonging to a tradition which valued resistance, Boas and her peers would have been entirely excluded per Des Pres’ definition. However, the heroism of which Des Pres speaks may not be a desirable designation even for Etty, who wrote to affirm the value of her life in spite of war, as Des Pres has reduced heroism into a condition of dying. Though Etty prepared herself for it, Etty’s writings were on the richness of life, not on the glory of death. Etty reveals an active effort not to retract or surrender to the ease of death, and, quoting Walther Rathenau’s *Letters to a Woman in Love*, writes, “I know that you suffer, and I suffer with you. Be kind to that suffering.”¹⁴² Though he was not Jewish, Des Pres spent a lifetime contemplating the Holocaust and its horrors. Des Pres made a career, as well, of this tragic heroism, assuming the role of secondary witness with eyes peeled until his death in 1987 at only 48 years old. Though the examiner’s office first ruled his death accidental, a *Boston Globe* article three years later revealed that Des Pres had, in his own words, consummated his death and, in fact, died by hanging. Speaking on why he wrote his book about survivors, he says, “in a way, I don’t know. In another way I wrote it simply because I felt I had to. And then, and it’s true, I wrote about them because I simply admire them, more than I can say,” admired what they were able to withstand and then that they were able to persist.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Des Pres, *The Survivor*, 5, 7.

¹⁴² Hillesum, *Etty*, 183.

¹⁴³ Des Pres, “The secondary witness,” 24:46–25:14.

Admired, perhaps, even after the pain, their will to live. Is there truly no pathos to be found in Etty's diaries? Is there no horror in death sharpening his scythe even if you cannot always see him from over your shoulder?

Etty: An Offering

In writing this paper I worked with the 2002 English edition of the diaries: *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941–1943*. A hefty hardcover book, the letters inscribed in gold on the spine, I carried this, carried her, with me for just over a month. In this sense I carried an actual weight, and too took it on in my heart. I am a Jewish woman, though in earnest I was not raised particularly religious at all. I never went to Hebrew school nor was I Bat Mitzvahed. Whether you think I am a daughter of the commandment in the traditional sense, I am nonetheless the daughter of two Jews and the granddaughter of four and so forth. I know this, every day in every moment, and I do not forget it. I do not ask anyone permission or request that anyone offer affirmation of my Jewishness because it is in me in the way my family is at the table and their thick New York accents always interrupting each other and the way we talk about sex and about survival. I am fortunate to have all this because I know it is a pure stroke of luck. I have a family alive and we are happy when so many others have died. And I carry that weight. And Etty's diaries mean something to me. These diaries which she says she wants to share, in part, "so that those who come after [her] do not have to start all over again."¹⁴⁴ What can I give her in return?

When Etty's diaries were first published, around two thirds of the diary was retracted in the name of propriety. These edits undeniably altered the obscurity which I believe to be most significant in Etty's writings. Gaarlandt and Smelik both recall Etty's scrawling script, slanted across the pages, her constant reiterations and refinements; I have only seen pictures. Though Etty's prose, perhaps, was clear, Etty was contending not only with the war but with herself, frequently unsatisfied with her work. Etty's feelings, as feelings are, were transitory,

¹⁴⁴ Hillesum, *Etty*, 462.

sometimes revoked the very next day. Etty attempts, throughout her diaries, not to impart a conclusion but to pull back the curtain and show us her struggle. Yet her suffering often remains unseen. Etty's critics, Boas and Patterson, who through their efforts have isolated Etty from her Jewish community and denied her legitimacy as a witness, reject Etty's claims to harm and to victimhood. DePres, however, who venerates Etty as a hero, though he takes her offering, certainly, with grace, engages with Etty receptively rather than reciprocally. I do agree with Des Pres that Etty has taken the conditions of her victimhood into her own hands. I am not certain that makes her a hero and, either way, I don't know if that matters.

Hero. I don't know if that word means anything to me. I don't think that Etty wanted to be a hero. I know I do not want to be. I think that we are all doing our best to survive. Etty resisted Nazism by attending to her interiority, though never turning away from those around her. I would argue that Etty attended to herself as unselfishly as possible: attended to herself so as to attend to others. It was her writing which sustained her, and in this sense, it was the very fact of having an offering, something to give, which for Etty made life worth living. It was because she wanted to offer hope to others that she worked to find it in herself. And yet, to focus entirely on Etty's offering to others, or Etty's offerings to us, we fail to grasp the tragedy of her death and thus attenuate her pains. I can see her suffering. I feel as though she sees mine.

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