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[Book review of: Klaas A.D. Smelik, Marja Clement, Gerrit Van Oord, Jurjen Wiersma eds. (2020) *Etty Hillesum en de receptie van haar dagboeken*]

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Klaas A.D. Smelik, Marja Clement, Gerrit Van Oord, Jurjen Wiersma, ed.  
*Etty Hillesum en de receptie van haar dagboeken*. Cahiers Etty Hillesum 1.  
Oud-Turnhout: Gompels & Svacina: 2020. 165 pp. ISBN 9789463711975

Forty years ago, the first publication of Etty Hillesum's posthumous writings appeared. Her warmly received diary *Het verstoorde leven* (An Interrupted Life) was followed by *Het denkende hart van de barak*, her letters from Camp Westerbork, and various translated editions. Her work is accessible in no less than eighteen languages and has been interpreted in plays and documentaries, making her one of the best-known Dutch Holocaust authors internationally. Her status is reflected in the existence of a Etty Hillesum Center in Deventer, focusing on social and educational activities, and in the recent decision to declare the house on Gabriël Metsu Street in Amsterdam where she wrote her wartime diaries a municipal monument. Academic interest in her work resulted, among other things, in the establishment of the Etty Hillesum Research Center, initially at Ghent University and later moved to Middelburg.

In March 1941, Hillesum (1914-1943), a student of Slavic languages, started her diary at the suggestion of psychochirologist Julius Spier, a refugee from Germany who was her mentor and lover, in order to track her inner evolution. She worked for the Jewish Council in Amsterdam and Westerbork before being murdered in Auschwitz in November 1943. Her diaries and letters – held at the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam – show her literary talent and her altruism. But Hillesum's reflections, as critic Jos Palm observed in 2014, unintentionally reduced the reality of the Nazi occupation to yet another sad expression of the general human condition. It reflected her sincere, highly individual attempt to avoid despair and hatred at the time of the Holocaust, during which she rejected opportunities to go into hiding.

Klaas A.D. Smelik, the son of a communist friend, initiated the publication of the diaries in the early 1980s. As a devoted scholar, he played an essential role in analyzing and spreading awareness of Hillesum's work, particularly through his efforts for the scholarly edition of her *Collected Works*, which also appeared in English, French and Italian (German and Spanish editions forthcoming). The *Collected Works* illustrated her superior reporting, but

also, according to Palm, 'her higher navel-gazing', reflecting 'a great deal of intellectualistic narcissism'. That characteristic, however, hardly caused irritation among scholars who studied her life and work.

Despite the fact that research about Hillesum's work was stimulated by the publication of the *Collected Works*, Smelik concludes that researchers are working separately from each other. Whether this will be improved with this first volume of the so-called *Cahiers Etty Hillesum* remains to be seen. The choice for a publication predominantly in Dutch might be understandable, but as a stimulus to international research this decision may have been too pragmatic. That the authors in this cahier 'have earned their spurs in the field of Etty Hillesum research' is true, but it also raises the question why not more researchers from outside this inner circle have been attracted. The mention on the back cover that the authors perceive disregard for Hillesum and her mentor Spier suggests a great devotion that perhaps does not automatically guarantee an openminded approach.

The theme of this cahier, the reception of her publications at home and abroad, is taken rather broadly. A contribution by Smelik on 'Fate and God with Etty Hillesum' makes clear that God was not completely absent when he did not intervene in the Holocaust. How this aspect relates to the reception of Hillesum's work is not addressed. This also applies to two historical documents that are included: parts of the memoirs of Henny Neitzel-Tideman, a contemporary of Hillesum who was disturbed by the negative image of Spier, edited by Alexandra Nagel, and the memories of American historian Gerd Kornman of the friendship between his father Osias and Erich Cohn, two Westerbork survivors – a relationship in which Hillesum only plays a minor role. Nagel also contributes an article about Aimé van Santen, a student friend of Hillesum, briefly discussing Spier's analysis of Van Santen's hands that Hillesum put to paper in January 1942. From a cultural-historical point of view, this can undoubtedly reveal something about Spier's way of looking at things and the enthusiasm Hillesum felt for it. But, rather surprisingly, the extent to which this 'protocol' constitutes a credible basis for the presumed connection between this observation and Van Santen's character and life course is not called into question, suggesting chirologist practices are like regular academic disciplines.

More relevant is the concluding contribution in which Smelik illuminates the publication history of the diaries, an article which would certainly not have been out of place as an introduction to this volume. 'Doing something for posterity' reflects how much the author's family history, his efforts to have Hillesum's work published, and his scholarly interest are intertwined. He looks back with mixed feelings on the success of his efforts, which have

resulted in a one-sided emphasis on her spirituality and a posthumous tendency to annex Hillesum's memory to the Christian church. While Smelik himself read the diaries 'kneeling in front of my father's desk' with a 'feeling of reverence and timidity', he now sees Etty Hillesum being either 'at the mercy of uncomprehending criticism or uncritical admiration'. He does appreciate the 'useful detachment' of foreign researchers who can observe aspects that appear less evident to Dutch scholars, such as her mother's Russian background. Whether or not this awareness has led to further cross-fertilization among the scholarly community is not yet clear.

The volume opens with a contribution by Jurrien Mol, who discusses a lecture by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, in which he claims that a religious life is a material life. He illustrates this 'materiality' with a quote from Hillesum who learned to kneel as an intimate physical religious act, a prayer posture that was not part of her Jewish upbringing. As a theologian, Mol zooms in on the spiritual without benefiting from new academic insights about embodiment and performativity, and neither shows much concern for the specifically Christian appropriation of Hillesum's spirituality.

The core of the volume, which comprises barely 40 pages, consists of contributions by Patrica Couto, Gerrit Van Oord and Mijke van Leersum on transnational cultural transfer. The latter zooms in on the problems posed by Hillesum's specific idiolect – expressed particularly in the inner dialogue – when attempts are made to translate her texts. Central to her very informative article is the English translation of the *Collected Works* by Arnold J. Pomerans, in which Hillesum's sometimes explosive, harsh words have been toned down to a more amiable level so that her fierce side insufficiently reaches the English-speaking audience. Couto focuses on the reception of Hillesum's work in Portugal which only started in 2008 but does not come up with a clear conclusion. It is noteworthy that, parallel to the Netherlands, the emphasis in public reception was squarely on the spiritual element of the diaries, this time in a Catholic context. In line with this, the diary appeared in series of theological books by Christian authors. In the appropriation by the readers, notions of holiness and martyrdom were not far away, although there was also a more modest philosophical reception. The reception in Italy is highlighted by placing the exhibition 'Heaven Lives in Me' in Rimini at the center of an overly detailed contribution. Van Oord describes how Hillesum was the subject of one of twenty exhibitions at the annual meeting of the Catholic Lay Movement *Comunione e Liberazione*, a prominent cultural event. The exhibit documented Hillesum's religious development in the historical context of the Nazi-occupied Netherlands, as

an individual spiritual quest for a religious self-consciousness, which the organizers hoped to stimulate in visitors as well.

The pragmatic Christian appropriation in the various contributions seems suitable for an overarching discussion. A comparative reflection on this phenomenon, which would have improved the significance of this volume, is sadly lacking. Several authors are clearly marked by their reverence for the intellectual protagonist, creating the impression of being too close to the subject matter while studying their subject in a certain isolation – whereas broader contextualization is desirable. No serious attempts are made to compare the reception to that of other Holocaust authors, whether creators of ego documents written during the war, such as Anne Frank, or authors of postwar work such as Primo Levi. Despite the lack of focus and excessive diversity, this collection contains interesting starting points for further analysis, but a broader and more detached approach is vital to fulfilling the promise of future cahiers in this series.

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