

2d INTERNATIONAL ETTY HILLESUM CONGRESS GHENT 13-15 JANUARY 2014

Jean-Pierre Nave

President of the « Association des Amis d'Etty Hillesum »

THE IMPACT OF ETTY HILLESUM'S WRITINGS IN FRANCE TODAY

Scriptura cum legentibus crescit
"Scripture grows with those who read it."
Gregory the Great Homilies on Ezekiel,

Summary

Ever since the first edition of "An Interrupted Life" (in French « Une Vie Bouleversée » 1985) the popularity of the writings of Etty Hillesum in French circles has grown continually, as can be seen from the number of articles, essays, plays and the numerous events that have been devoted to them. Etty Hillesum's writings have touched the horizon of expectations of a public, most of whom are Christian, searching for meaning, and refusing to be satisfied by truths being forced upon them.. From the young woman's writings readers draw elements of a certain art of living, a spirituality, and an ethical stance on social commitment which comply with their expectations, and which are particularly well in tune with the values of autonomy and authenticity characteristic of contemporary individualism.

Introduction

The publication of Etty Hillesum's writings will, without any doubt, be among the most marked literary events of our time. In order to try to appreciate their impact in France today, I will begin by quoting a few significant figures ; I will then try to outline who the readers of Etty Hillesum are, and then I will present the principal spheres which, from my point of view, retain the interest of these readers.

This research is based not only on the books in French about Etty Hillesum (about twenty at the moment) but also on the various articles published in the main daily French newspapers and in literary or spiritual magazines, the press kits of plays about Etty Hillesum and the numerous exchanges that we have had within the French Association "Les Amis d'Etty Hillesum" (the friends of Etty Hillesum).

I. A FEW FIGURES

** Etty Hillesum's writings*

According to the latest figures I have received, « An interrupted life » has sold 238 000 copies in all its different editions. That is 40 000 for the 1985 edition, and 198 000 for the paperback of 1995. There are 12 000 printed copies of the complete edition of her writings brought out in 2008.¹ These figures confirm that the bestseller undeniably remains the paperback edition of «*Une vie bouleversée* » (*An interrupted life*) followed by the Westerbork letters edited by the Seuil in 1995. Which leads us to an important remark: that it's through the double filter of a translation and a selection of extracts that the vast majority of French readers have come to know the writings of Etty Hillesum. This should be taken into account in order to avoid projecting too quickly about what the young woman was really like. I would point out translator Philippe Noble's remark « *Etty Hillesum's image would be more correct if we could get away from the rather hagiographic image which these extracts would suggest.* »²

¹ Figures published on 7th January 2014 by the Martinière – le Seuil Bookshop, Paris

² Philippe Noble, *Le texte d'Etty Hillesum, de l'original à la traduction française : un cheminement singulier*, in *Revue française de linguistique appliquée* 2003/2 (Vol VIII) -
http://www.cairn.info/article.php?ID_REVUE=RFLA&ID_NUMPUBLIE=RFLA_082&ID_ARTICLE=RFLA_082_31

* *Essays on Etty Hillesum's writings*

To date, 20 books devoted (entirely or in part) to Etty Hillesum have been published in French. Out of 19 books, 11 have been published since 2008, the date of the publication of her complete writings. Numerous press articles and radio programs following this publication can explain the increase in our author's audience from 2008 onwards.

* *Plays written since 2004*

We have noted about twenty different plays that have been written since 1985 about Etty Hillesum's writing. In 2013, five different plays have been performed in France. If I can single out one of these shows which has enjoyed large audiences, the play « *Le Souffle d'Etty* » by the Compagnie le Puits, directed by Michel Vienot has been performed over a hundred times since its first performance in March 2011, mainly in Christian institutions (but also in the Avignon Festival in 2012 and 2013) with an estimated overall audience of 10 000. For the year 2013 to 2014 over 40 performances have been booked. « *Le Souffle d'Etty* » has also been adapted for school audiences

* *Sessions, congresses, conferences*

During this year 2013 to 14 we know of about ten meetings, sessions and congresses organized in France about Etty's writings.

Conclusion

Just by looking at these figures, we can see how her Etty Hillesum's writings have enjoyed a remarkable reception, considering they are 70 years old.

II. THE FRENCH READERS OF ETTY HILLESUM

a) *Loving readers*

If the success of a literary work is linked to the interactive conjunction between the meaning of the text and the expectations of the readers, it is undeniable that Etty Hillesum's writings have concurred with the expectations of many people today. We could quote here many reactions that we have received within our Association. But they could be summed up by this admission from the writer Cécilia Dutter³ : « *I opened Etty Hillesum's diary. I didn't read it, it spoke to me (...) she was there beside me (...) she was giving herself to me, laying her greatness and her smallness at my feet so that I could take them into me and that I could feed on her radiant humanity.* »³

This impression she gives of being a close friend, strongly enhanced by the literary genre of a private diary, has given birth through her writings to a kind of « loving readership », who call her by her first name and talk about her as if she were alive, without worrying too much about the « referential illusion » i.e the confusion between the written work and reality, the writing and the writer.

For all that, this impression of nearness particularly reveals a mirror effect which makes Etty Hillesum into an « emblematic modern figure » (to use an expression of the late father Paul Lebeau s.j.) and who gives her writings many different interpretations and projections. Yves Bridonneau, a real authority on Etty Hillesum's writing, who will shortly bring out a book whose manuscript I have read, says: *Everyone can pick out what he wants and there is something there for everyone. Etty Hillesum's writings are a wellspring where each person can come to draw water, water to quench each one's thirst....* »⁴

b) *Post-modern Christian readers*

Nevertheless, Etty Hillesum's readers in France seem to us to be more or less of one kind. Reading the works of authors interested in her, looking at the symposiums organized about her writing, listening to the discussions that we have heard, it is for a large part – but of course not exclusively – in Christian and more specifically Catholic circles that Etty Hillesum's readers come from. And more precisely,

³ Cécilia Dutter, *Etty Hillesum: Une voix dans la nuit*. Paris - Robert Laffont, 2010

⁴ Yves Bridonneau « Etty Hillesum, la Shoah, et Dieu » (to be published)

amongst these Catholics are many who are searching for a spirituality better suited to our secular age. They are the same people who read or would be interested in reading Maurice Zundel, Maurice Bellet, Annick de Souzenelle, Marie Balmary, Jean-Yves Leloup, Christiane Singer, the protestant theologian Lytta Basset or even the prolific German benedictine Anselm Grün, and other Christian authors accessible to the wider public whose thinking which includes a social vision, is searching paths off the beaten track.

We have equally noticed that all the authors of works in French about Etty Hillesum declare themselves Christian and most of them are Catholic. Two of them are Jesuits, two Dominican, and one is a White Father. In French speaking Europe, four Jesuit spiritual Centres have organised sessions or spiritual retreats on the writings of Etty Hillesum.⁵

We must mention also the remarkable success of the little book « *Praying for a fortnight with Etty* » written by a Belgian Jesuit Pierre Ferrière and Isabelle Meüs, published by Nouvelles Cités in 2004. 13 000 copies have been printed – one of the best sellers of the Collection.⁶

We must also underline the interest that numerous philosophers, theologians and spiritual authors have in Etty Hillesum's writings; so many that it is impossible to mention them by name. Pope Benedict XVI himself, in one of his last interventions addresses given in French, on the 13 February 2013, evoked Etty Hillesum as a modern figure of conversion : « *This young fragile and dissatisfied woman, transfigured by faith, becomes a woman full of love and inner peace, able to say: "I live in constant intimacy with God."* »

One statistic would confirm what we have said about those who read Etty : for many years « An interrupted life » has figured amongst the best sellers of paperbacks in the network of the religious bookshop « la Procure » whereas, for the same period, it does not even appear amongst the top 100 paperbacks in the network of the secular FNAC bookshops.

c) The horizon of expectations

In order to better discern the profile of our readers, let us try to define the « horizon of expectations »⁷ This notion, taken from literary studies about how a work is received, states that according to his present state of mind the reader brings a literary work up to date, appropriates its meaning, and may well insure its success. In France, as in most western countries, the Christians who are recognized as being « searching Christians » are no longer satisfied by the truths imposed by the churches in matter of dogma or morality. Their research, based on the values of autonomy and freedom, authenticity and sincerity which characterize contemporary individualism, values personal experience. And it's from the thousands of little bits of meaning that they discover that they can build or re-build the symbolic universe which suits them and which gives meaning to their existence. This work of course evokes the metaphor of « religious bricolage » « do-it-yourself religion » of Levi Strauss, taken up by Michel de Certeau⁸ and made popular by religious sociologists like Danièle Hervieu-Léger⁹

In fact this idea, qualified as « completely new », was practiced more or less exactly by Etty Hillesum. The reader of « *An interrupted life* » discovers a young woman, who is surprisingly modern and who, without belonging to any organized religion and outside of any dogma, day by day develops a spirituality based on her personal experience and cultural context. This spirituality will give her the taste and strength to live, and it will be validated by the authenticity of the choices she makes in life. Etty Hillesum appears to be an expert in « *spiritual bricolage* », « do-it-yourself spirituality », without wishing to put a negative connotation onto this expression introduced by the ethnology and sociology of religion. Furthermore as she manages to express her research in every day language that everyone can understand, she encourages the reader, not to imitate her behaviour, but to try to live this spiritual

⁵ la Baume les Aix (Fr), Saint Hugues de Biviers (Fr), La Pairelle (Be), Notre Dame de la Route (Ch)

⁶ Pierre Ferrière et Isabelle Meeüs-Michiels, « *Prier 15 jours avec Etty Hillesum* » - Bruyères-le-Châtel Nouvelle Cité, 2005. Chiffre communiqué par l'éditeur.

⁷ Conçue d'abord par le philosophe allemand Edmund Husserl (1858-1938), initiateur du courant phénoménologique, le notion d'horizon d'attente fut reprise par Hans Robert Jauss dans son « *Esthétique de la réception d'une œuvre littéraire* ».

⁸ Michel de Certeau, *La culture au pluriel*, Christian Bourgois, 1980 et (en collaboration avec Jean-Marie Domenach), *Le christianisme éclaté* Paris, Seuil, 1974

⁹ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, « *Le Pèlerin et le converti* »- La religion en mouvement, Paris, Flammarion, 1999

adventure for himself, an adventure within his reach which is inspired by paying attention to what life brings along. And all that without prejudice to the difference that can exist between the basic intention of the author and the appropriation by the readers who are always ready to reduce what the author says to fit their own experience.

III. WHAT IS IMPORTANT FOR FRENCH READERS OF ETTY HILLESUM

Of all the ideas that were consciously invested in and worked on by the young woman, three areas seem to particularly interest her readers. Like three anchor points, where the readers dwell as they seem to find an answer to three vital questions:

- 1 How to be happy in life? *Etty becomes a master of wisdom*
- 2 What spirituality can make sense for one's life? *Etty is a spiritual guide*
- 3 How to find freedom in the face of an ever more repressive system? *Etty is like a model of internal resistance.*

1. How to be happy in life ?

First of all Etty Hillesum seems to be a master of wisdom. A literary journalist of a French daily paper presented Etty's diary « *like a practical philosophical manual on how to succeed in life. The whole of life, right up to the last .* »¹⁰

And concerning the title « master » the university lecturer Alain Delaye in his book « *Sagesses concordantes* »¹¹ published in 2007, presents Etty Hillesum « *as one of those rare individuals who deserves the name of master for they diffuse a brightness strong enough to enlighten the next century.* »

Without pretending to give a complete picture, I have noted about ten themes on the art of being happy that we could illustrate with many quotations from the Diary and the Letters. Here they are as they come:

- accept yourself as you are with your darker and lighter sides
- develop your capacity to pay attention, to listen, to be present to yourself
- welcome what life brings every day, be it positive or negative
- do not let yourself be invaded by cares or worries for the future
- look reality in the face without lying to yourself
- accept what comes, what is inevitable
- refuse hatred in order to preserve the humanity in yourself and in others
- accept suffering and death as part of life
- choose and protect life « life which in its unfathomable is so wonderfully good »¹²
- live eros in a positive way, without shame or guilt

It is hardly surprising that every one of these themes can be found in the many books on personal development which can be found all over bookshops today. But reading Etty Hillesum is something else entirely. Accompanying her day by day on her path of development, watching her grow, become more mature, be transformed, the reader ends up saying (and I quote) : « *If I tried to do like her, my life would be better, and I would surely be much happier.* »

2. What kind of spirituality for what kind of transcendancy ?

One of the characteristics of modern times is without doubt the disappearance of the idea of an extrinsic, providing God who directs and commands everything. The disappearance of this image, together with the complex process of secularization, seems to have posed no problem to our author. She lives it, simply, in the prayer of 12th July 1942 : « *Alas, there doesn't seem to be much You*

¹⁰ Richard Sourgnès in « Le Républicain Lorrain » du 5 déc. 2010

¹¹ Alain Delaye, *Sagesses concordantes, quatre maîtres pour notre temps : Etty Hillesum, Vimala Thakar, Prajnânpd, Krisnamurti - Accarias* 2007, p. 16

¹² Letter to Maria Tuinzing 2nd Septembre 1943, Ecrits p. 921

Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. (...) It is becoming increasingly clearer to me, with each beat of my heart, that you cannot help us."

And in a way which is quite original for the times her God is in-dwelling, a source of life and freedom, but fragile and dispossessed of his omnipotence, and of Whom we must take care. Her God will not leave her and, right up to the end, she will find in Him her strength and her « joie de vivre ». It is understandable that such an idea of God could provoke the « tsim-tsum » of the Hassidic tradition and remind us of the Christian theology of the cross.

For Etty, the discovery of an in-dwelling God is by no means reserved for the elite, it is accessible to everyone, as long as, as she writes « *we teach people to work at their inner life.* » The reader is encouraged to enter into a deep spiritual process of a mystical nature, which can be lived without retreating from the world, without any extraordinary vision or revelation, and without any imposed mortification which accompanied the Christian mystic in the shadows of the cloisters for a long time.

3. What kind of moral code permits us to stay free?

If this third subject, quoted again and again by readers and commentators of Etty's writings, is an invitation to be vigilant in the face of any return to barbarity, it applies also to the contemporary research of a moral code of commitment to which our younger readers seem to us particularly sensitive. Maybe we should talk about a moral code of release? Release from « ready made thinking » or « enjoyment at all costs », a protest against a dehumanizing modernity submitted to the destructive desolation of economic liberalism.

For the Parisian psychoanalyst, Jean-Michel Hirt, in a book published in 2012 entitled « *Human Dignity through the eyes of Etty Hillesum and Sigmund Freud* »¹⁴, the commercial culture imposed on us today leads inevitably to the drying up of the soul's resources.

*« Eaten away by crisis after crisis, and petrified spiritually, many of Etty's readers are as she was at the beginning, confronted with a chaos inside them ; they depreciate themselves, or idolize themselves, do not manage to be alone, do not identify any more with established religious precepts ; deprived of all reference points and symbols, they aspire through their physical or mental disorders to express their spirituality or to revive an interior life. »*¹³

Etty Hillesum's testimony will offer them a real example of spiritual resistance: without dissociating herself from what she calls « a common fate », the inevitable which is imposed on everyone, she knew how to resist losing her humanity, resist cynicism and hatred.

She gives hope in the most constraining, the most humiliating situations, it is possible not to renounce being a woman or a man worthy of the name. « *providing that Go dis in safe hands with us* » as she says in one of her last letters. Maybe one of the only ways of resisting the massification of subjects and the compulsive explosion that accompanies it.

Conclusion

In the hive of spiritual searching created by the falling away of religious belief, Etty Hillesum's writings reply in a particularly relevant way to the searching for meaning of people today. They find there a way of living which is calming and a personal spirituality which is open and tolerant and on the same wavelength as today's culture, and also an encouragement to preserve their freedom in the face of the pressures of modern society.

*« From this young woman who is smitten with life and with love,
and wildly generous in life and in love,
we have everything to learn, to receive and to meditate. »*¹⁴

¹³ Jean-Michel Hirt, *La dignité humaine – Sous le regard d'Etty Hillesum et de Sigmund Freud*, DDB 2012

¹⁴ Sylvie Germain, *Etty Hillesum*. Pygmalion 1999, p. 17