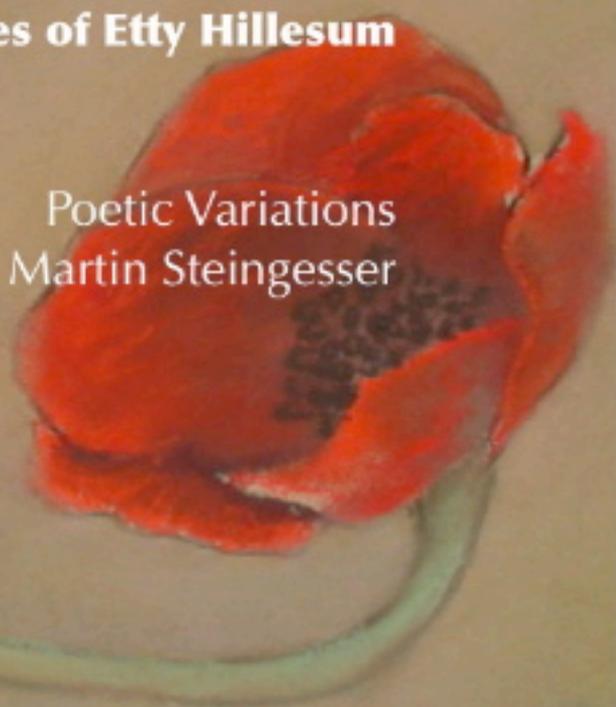


The Thinking Heart

The Life & Loves of ETTY HILLESUM

Poetic Variations
by Martin Steingesser



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from

Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943



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(Poem numbers indicate sequence rather than page numbers.)

INTRODUCTION

To become as simple and as wordless as the growing corn or the falling rain.

—*Etty Hillesum*

The Thinking Heart is an original arrangement of the journal and letters of Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life & Letters from Westerbork*, constellated as poems, which comprise what we have from this extraordinary Dutch woman before she died in Auschwitz, in 1943. The order and relationships of thoughts and images often are changed, the text edited, yet they remain true to her intentions as best as I have been able to understand.

My goal has been to select, simplify and condense while not losing anything, retaining the integrity and power of the original while somehow amplifying Etty's voice. In her own poetic words, "to become as simple and as wordless as the growing corn or the falling rain." I am also indebted to the translation from the Dutch by Arnold J. Pomerans, in the Owl Books edition of her journal and letters published by Henry Holt and Company. A complete and unabridged edition, *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, was published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, in 2002.

Early in the journal Etty writes, "I am full of unease . . . a creative unease. Not of the body, not even a dozen passionate nights of love could assuage it. It is almost a sacred unease. Oh God, take me into Your great hands and turn me into Your instrument, let me write." And a little later on, "All my tenderness, all my emotions, this whole swirling soul-lake, soul-sea, soulocean, or whatever you want to call it, wants to pour out . . . to flow forth into just one short poem."

Etty's journal and letters were written over two years, ending with the transport to Auschwitz, where she died at 29. She never had the opportunity to write the one, short poem, yet there are moments in the journal and her letters when the

prose is poetry, at least for me. Passages leap out when I read her, almost reforming of their own into poems.

There is no intention with these versions of her writing to improve on Etty's journal, there being no substitute for experiencing her words as she writes them, their clarity and directness, their hard-won emotional insights and the intimacy they create. Why do this, then? I find the answer in something Van Gogh wrote: "This is not a thing I have sought . . . it has come across my path, and I have seized it."

Etty inspires wonder and deepens appreciation for the kind of courage that stays a hostile course without recourse to violence, passionately committed to knowing and choosing a path of light, in service of life and spirit. Here is the story of a woman fully meeting the darkest of fates, heightened to the finest moral and aesthetic pitch by her determination, courage, and ability to transform the experience through writing.

Witnessing the conscious choices Etty makes, including refusing to escape, as she confronts the Nazis and her fears, one of the things I see would have been lost in violent response to the oppression, either for defense or retribution, would have been the ability to continue, with the opportunities for lightening suffering and for healing, her own as well that of others, in the dark journey she chose.

Light, where does it come from? Stars? Ourselves? "I cannot find the right words . . . for that radiant feeling inside me," Etty says, "which encompasses but is untouched by all the suffering and all the violence." Somewhere in her long journey into the Holocaust night she discovers light in herself that became visible to others, an incandescence, still glowing. To open her journal, or read these poems, is to see this light, feel its heat.

Martin Steingesser

The Thinking Heart

for Ety

ONE • APRIL-JULY 1942

The Red Anemone

“Just a red, faded anemone.
But I like the idea that in years to come
I’ll chance upon it again
between these pages. By then
I’ll be a matron
and hold this dried flower in my hand
and say with a touch of sadness:
Look, this is the anemone I wore
on the 55th birthday of the man
who was the greatest friend of my youth.
It was during the third year of the War,
we ate under-the-counter macaroni
and drank real coffee,
on which Liesl got drunk,
all of us in such high spirits,
wondering if the war would be over soon,
and I wore the red anemone in my hair.”

—*Etty Hillesum, April 26, 1942*

[2]

I poured out the tenderness,
all the tenderness
one cannot express
even for a man one loves.
I poured it all out
into the great, all-embracing spring night.
I stood on a little bridge,
looking across the water,
melted into the landscape,
offering all my tenderness
up to the sky and stars,
and to the little bridge—
the best moment of the day.

[3]

I sleep in his arms,
but today's joy is the magnolia,
whose mysterious beauty
scares me. I stood open-mouthed,
as if nailed to the floor,
stroking the leaves with my fingertips,
longing for the magnolia
the way I long for a man.

[4]

First, in the bathroom,
painting this pale face,
adjusting the Cossack cap
before the mirror.
Seeing him for just five minutes—
Yes, I'm off to see Spier,
to roam the landscape of his face.
I am off to see Spier, my friend.
My best friend, to warm
in his radiance.

5]

Last night, riding along,
looking forward to seeing him,
I felt the spring air.
Yes, that's how it should be,
one immense, tender love
Why shouldn't we fall in love,
the air so soft a man's hands,
his hands, seemed coarse.

[6]

And so I came to him.
His bed had been turned down.
Above, a spray of orchids
hung to spread fragrance.
Beside his pillow, daffodils
so yellow and young.
There was no need to lie down,
as if I'd had a whole night loving.

[7]

Such a bright, spring night,
his face so young in moonlight.
How pin a man down
in writing? Not the face
animated in moonlight.

[8]

I shall make a dress,
open all the sides to the sun,
the wind—his caress.

[9]

Han has taken off his shirt,
and again I stretch, relax
along his body. O my
two trees, my two dagger thrusts
into the starry sky.
An hour ago I was with Spier,
and there was only the one,
single controlled caress.
I looked at his mouth, whispered
to it, I will sip your breath.
And now, beside Han,
my bare legs between his thighs,
he too so familiar, so close.
Does he want me tonight? And Spier?
I have sipped his breath.

[10]

Feelings pile in crates
and bales in the thin storeroom
of my body.

[11]

The threat grows, terror
grows daily. I draw prayer
round me like a wall.

Two • JULY 1942 – SEPTEMBER 1943

[12]

Worries leap up like vermin.
A knot inside makes it hard
to breathe. Pace the room,
have a stomachache.
I will write these times like faint
brush strokes against the great
wordlessness of God, Life, Death,
Suffering, Eternity,
wield this fountain pen
like a hammer, my words
so many hammer blows.