

James Knox Whittet  
[president@suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk](mailto:president@suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk)

### The Purple Lupins: Etty Hillesum (1914 – 1943)

Although Etty Hillesum was not a poet in the conventional sense, her Diary is one of the most deeply poetic books of the 20th Century.

She was born into a Dutch Jewish family in the town of Middelburg in the Netherlands and she was the oldest of three children. At the age of eighteen, she left what she described as the *madhouse* of her family home to become a student in Amsterdam. It was later in Amsterdam that she met the great love of her life, the psychoanalyst, Julian Speer who had an enormous influence on her life and thought. She first met Speer as one of his patients as she suffered from deep depressive episodes but she later became his lover. It's believed that it was Speer who encouraged her to keep a diary as an intellectual and spiritual record of her life. Etty did not begin writing her diary until the spring of 1941 and it's easy to forget that one of the greatest diaries in literary history was only written for some two and half years. Those two and a half years marked not only a turning point in Etty's life but a turning point in the life of European Jews.

*Here goes, then. This is a painful and well-nigh insuperable step for me: yielding up so much that has been suppressed to a blank sheet of lined paper.*

Over the months of keeping a diary, she strives not only to observe the subtle changes in herself but feels almost a duty to record every aspect of life which she encounters, particularly as she begins to realize that the Nazis had set out to destroy

her people. In May, 1940, the German army invaded Holland and Dutch Jews became increasingly isolated in their own country: they were removed from their jobs; banned from many shops and restaurants; often beaten up by gangs on the streets; ghettos were formed and labour camps set up. In April, 1942, all Jews had to wear the Star of David. The Nazis gradually and relentlessly transported Jews to the east of the Netherlands close to the border with Germany. A transit camp was set up at Westerbork: this was the final train stop to Auschwitz.

Etty had begun the writing of her diary as a form of self-exploration and therapy but she became more and more to feel that it was her task to bear witness to the world in which she found herself.



*And I shall wield this slender fountain pen as if it were a hammer and my words will have to be so many hammer-strokes with which to beat out the story of our fate and of a piece of history as it is and never was before.*

Her diary also became a dialogue with God – that was the name she called *what is deepest inside*

*me*. As her diary progresses through darker and darker times, she uses the word more frequently and more naturally. She wrote; *I repose in myself. And that part of myself, that deepest and richest part in which I repose, is what I call 'God'*. Etty's God was not the all-powerful God taught in Sunday school but a helpless and suffering one: prayer is not going to prevent infants being thrown alive into a furnace

*But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all that we can manage in these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves.*

As the great medieval Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart wrote: *Without man, God wouldn't know that he existed.*

There is a pronounced mystical dimension to Etty's diary and she had the most extraordinary ability to perceive beauty in the most terrible circumstances and grimmest surroundings.

*I know the persecution and oppression and despotism and the impotent fury and the terrible sadism. I know it all. And yet – at unguarded moments, when left to myself, I suddenly lie against the naked breast of life and her arms around me are so gentle and so protective and my own heartbeat so difficult to describe: so slow and so regular and so soft, almost muffled, but so constant, as it would never stop.*

Etty volunteered to accompany a

transportation to Westerbork as she felt that it was her moral duty not to escape the sufferings of others. In the midst of the sufferings of the transit camp, she experienced sudden, entirely unexpected, moments of deep peace and a sense of the deep unity of creation in which horror and beauty are inextricably bound up together.

*And then it suddenly happened: I was able to feel the contours of these times with my fingertips. How is it that this stretch of heathland surrounded by barbed wire, through which so much human misery has flooded, nevertheless remains inscribed in my memory as something almost lovely? How is it that my spirit far from being oppressed, seemed to grow lighter and brighter there? It is because I read the signs of the times and they did not seem meaningless to me.*

Like any great poet, Etty was acutely sensitive to the loveliness of the natural world. She felt a mysterious bond with the tree outside her apartment window in Amsterdam which seemed to mirror the fluctuations of her moods. In Westerbork, she would often gaze at a field of yellow and purple lupins which glowed in the sunlight and danced in the wind. That field of lupins contrasted with the pain and ugliness around her and in her less exalted moods, she was overwhelmed by the incomprehensible nature of existence. She found it equally incomprehensible that the regular rhythms of nature and human routine could continue in the face of such horror.

Due to a special permit from the Jewish Council in Amsterdam - an organization of influential Jews which Etty worked for briefly before realizing that the organization was just an aid to the Nazis - she was able to travel and from Amsterdam. However, this freedom to travel was merely temporary. The noose around the necks of Dutch Jews



*The sky is full of birds, the purple lupins stand up so regally and peacefully, two little old women have sat down on the box for a chat, the sun is shining on my face — and right before our eyes, mass murder. The whole thing is simply beyond comprehension.*

grew tighter and tighter. More and more men, women and children were herded on to the trains to Westerbork and from there forced on to the cattle trucks which led to Auschwitz. Etty's many friends urged her to go into hiding, rather like the family of Anne Frank. She refused to do so even though she was only too well aware what the consequences of this decision would be. She felt an unquenchable desire to record every aspect of her life as if in *King Lear's* words she was one of *God's spies*

*Ever present in me is an almost demonic urge to watch everything that happens. A wish to see and to hear and to be present, to worm out all of life's secrets, to observe with detachment what people look like in their last convulsions. And also, suddenly, to be forced to face oneself and to learn what one can from the spectacle that one's own soul enacts in these times. And later to be able to find the right words for it.*

When in Westerbork for the final time, along with her mother, father and brother, Etty was not just an observer but a luminous presence to her fellow prisoners as they waited for the last train east. She would comfort and help young mothers dress their children, knowing that this would be the last act of kindness they would ever receive. Even if they survived the nightmare journey in over-crowded cattle trucks, they would be marched straight into the gas chamber as soon as they staggered off the train.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of September, 1943, it was Etty's turn to be placed on *transport*. Her parents and her brother were herded onto the same train but on a different freight car. Her parents did not survive long; somehow her brother did survive but died on his way back to Holland. According to a report from the Red Cross Etty died on the last day of November, 1943. On the train to Auschwitz, Etty managed to push a postcard through the slats of the cattle truck and this card was later found by farmers. On the card was written:

*Opening the Bible at random I find this: 'The Lord is my high tower'. I am sitting on my rucksack in the middle of a full freight car. Father, Mother, and Mischa are a few cars away. In the end, the departure came without warning... We left the camp singing... Thank you for all your kindness and care.*

Etty left behind eight closely written exercise books which, thanks to her admiring friends, miraculously survived: one of the most precious gifts anyone has ever left behind. She wanted to survive the war in order to fulfil her dream of becoming a great writer but in those smudged, dog-eared notebooks, she had already achieved her desire.