

Embodying Etty: the diaries and letters adapted for performance¹

Prosthetic Memory

Ever since Susan Stein gave a performance at UCL of *Etty*, her one-woman play based on the writings of Etty Hillesum, I have promised myself I would reflect on this afterlife in performance of the diaries and letters that have become such important texts in the field of Holocaust writing. As my title suggests, there are two aspects to this: the adaptation of the diaries and letters to a form suitable for performance, and the embodied representation of the diarist. In particular, I ask what contribution performance can make to the process of remembering the Holocaust in our era of postmemory when fewer and fewer individuals have access to those with first-hand experience of the persecution and destruction of European Jewry by the Nazis.

Alison Landsberg is known for her work on prosthetic memories produced by mass media such as film because of their ability to make possible what she describes as ‘a portable form of memory. In this context, it becomes increasingly possible to take on memories of events through which one did not live, memories that, despite their mediated quality, had the capacity to transform one’s subjectivity, politics, and ethical engagements.’ (p. 221-2)² Not surprisingly, Landsberg’s work has generated controversy – James Berger, for example, thinks that her ‘memory’ is really just a combination of empathy and knowledge and that the prosthetic quality of film and experiential museums also applies to ‘traditional verbal texts’.³ While I agree with Berger that the role of mass media is probably not decisive, the question still remains as to whether something akin to memory can be transferred to an audience, and I will reflect on the impact of theatrical performance on the generation of memories.

In the case of *Etty* we are certainly not dealing with a mass audience but it is important to note that by performing Etty Hillesum’s diary, new and different audiences are reached. According to Landsberg, prosthetic memories ‘emerge at the interface between a person and a historical narrative at an experiential site’, and in the case of Stein’s *Etty* this site is the theatre or staging space, the narrative is the

¹ This is the text of a paper given at the Second International Etty Hillesum conference, held at the University of Ghent, 13-15 January 2014.

² Alison Landsberg, ‘Memory, Empathy, and the Politics of Identification’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 22/2, Special Issue Memory and Media Space (June 2009), 221-229.

³ James Berger, ‘Which Prosthetic? Mass Media, Narrative, Empathy, and Progressive Politics’, *Rethinking History*, 11/4, December 2007, 597-612.

play text and the individual audience members are the recipients of prosthetic memories. An interesting question is the extent to which this process is already in operation during that other interface between a historical narrative and an individual, i.e. between the diary itself and the adapter/performer. Has Stein through her embodiment of Etty already acquired prosthetic memories? Landsberg herself says that such memories 'are actually worn on the body'.⁴ Given its physicality, theatrical performance may even be the best mode of representation for generating prosthetic memory, since it involves the direct use of the actor's body to represent Etty through speech, gesture and presence.

Landsberg says

Through specific techniques of shooting and editing, films attempt to position the viewer in highly specific ways in relation to the unfolding narrative. [...] Sometimes, in such films, viewers are brought into intimate contact with a set of experiences that fall well outside of their own lived experience and, as a result, are forced to look as if through someone else's eyes, and asked to remember those situations and events. And sometimes that experience can be quite uncomfortable. (222)

My questions are: in what way does the Etty play position the spectator? With what experiences that fall outside of the spectator's lived experience is s/he confronted? What situations and events is the spectator asked to remember, and how does s/he feel as a result?

Adapting the diaries

In what follows I will examine Stein's strategy for adapting the diaries, using a positive approach as proposed by Linda Hutcheon in her book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006): 'As a creative and interpretive transposition of a recognizable other work or works, adaptation is a kind of extended palimpsest and, at the same time, often a transcoding into a different set of conventions.'⁵ Like Hutcheon I do not view adaptations as secondary to an 'original', but as new creations with particular aims. In the case of *Etty* the play, its adaptation is determined by the requirements of performance as the diary moves from published text of what was once a personal document to play text.

⁴ Landsberg, 'Memory, Empathy, and the Politics of Identification', 222.

⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York & London: Routledge, 2006, p.33.

I wish to thank Susan Stein for making part of her play text available to me, and I know from my discussions with her that it is a fluid text which is constantly subject to adjustments. In seeking to understand how she has transformed Etty's writing, I have compared her text against the full English translation and marked it up in a variety of ways, including which sections of the diary are represented in Stein's adaptation. Just as importantly, I asked her about her own motivation for creating the play and her response was as follows:

- 1) to make a play to bring Etty's words to people who might not read her, but would see the play and then read her;
- 2) to keep her alive;
- 3) to give something back to her. It felt like she gave me a lot. I had no idea how difficult writing the play would be. I had no idea how this project would change my life.

Following Hutcheon, I want to first consider the medium-specificity of adapting Etty's diary. The diary is a personal document which Etty used primarily to record her response to events in her life. Probably begun as an extension to her therapy sessions with Julius Spier, it soon becomes a way of talking to herself, and later, to God and to the divine within her. Many commentators, such as Jan G. Gaarlandt in his introduction to the first selection from the diaries, *Het verstoorde leven* (1981) and Eva Hoffmann, introducing the English translation, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries and Letters of Etty Hillesum 1941-43* (1996) emphasize the transformation of Etty's subjectivity as it emerges in the course of the diary and her development towards what Gaarlandt calls her 'radical altruism'.⁶ Stein's Etty does not depart from this view.

The diary consists of dated and sometimes also timed entries and is therefore structured in an episodic random yet chronological way. Of course it has already undergone transformation from this private document to one that is publicly available, and even more so to one that has been translated into 18 languages. It already has a number of afterlives, so the transfer to the stage is not such a large step when viewed against this background. In order to be dramatized, the diary must be dramatically reduced to produce an appropriate playing time for a one-woman

⁶ *Het verstoorde leven: Dagboek van Etty Hillesum, 1941-43*, edited by J.G. Gaarlandt. Haarlem: De Haan, 1981, p. 5.

play. Bearing in mind that I am analysing only a portion of the play – roughly the first half -, I have done a crude count of numbers of lines in the adaptation and diary: the year 1941 occupies around 63 lines of play text as against around 2,700 lines of the typescript of the English translation⁷; similarly 1942 occupies around 68 lines as against over 5,000 lines of diary.

Though written and organized as a diary with regular entries, many of these are quite lengthy autobiographical narratives and the diary's fascination resides in Etty's life narrative, and in the complexity of her self-representation, rather than in plot or stylistic virtuosity. The confessional nature of the diary brings its own tensions and resolutions, in other words it is, in my view, inherently dramatic, thus lending itself to reduction without necessarily radically altering its character.

My analysis of the play text⁷ looked at three main aspects:

- Its texture and textuality as an autobiographical monologue and how the diary was changed to achieve this
- Its temporality as expressed through the use of verb tenses
- Its references to the human body, especially Etty's.

I decided to focus on these for different reasons: first, it was important to know how the change of genre and purpose affected the nature of the text; second, how this genre change might particularly affect the narration of time and how this could be linked to performance values; and third, my particular theme of embodiment prompted me to look at the way Etty's physicality is expressed in both texts.

1. Texture and Etty recreated

Comparison with the diary reveals that the playtext has an extremely intricate, or mosaic-like, texture composed of successive short extracts from the diary interwoven with a number of longer ones. The short extracts are between half a line and five lines in length while the longer ones can be up to 17 lines long. As *III. 1* [scan of p.2 marked up] shows, Stein uses Etty's words, though not necessarily quoted verbatim, and not in the order in which they occur in the diary. Although they do not reproduce the chronology of the diary, it is possible to say that the first two pages are almost all composed from 1941 entries, while page 3 mixes 1941 and 1942, and by page 4

⁷ My thanks to Susan Stein for making part of the unpublished play text available.

1942 predominates. So the text does still follow the trajectory of Etty's life but without the strict separation of days, months and years. The texture of the playtext is very different from the diary's because of many omissions, some additions and certain crucial changes, as III 2 [scan of page 1 marked up] demonstrates.

This brief analysis shows how the impression of authenticity is created by a combination of radical cuts and faithful reuse. Clearly the selection of text is crucial to the way Etty herself comes across in Stein's version which uses revealing anecdotes such as the opening story about Professor Bonger, interspersed with 'telling' sentences – i.e. sentences that are dense with different kinds of meaning. In the section I analysed, the anecdotes help to establish key aspects of Etty as a subject, such as her empathy, warmth, sensuality, sexuality, and inner life through her relationships with others, while the short sentences move the narrative forward, such as the following examples from p. 3 of the typescript:

And suddenly I'm living differently. Although I hardly dare say so in company these days....

A buff envelope in my letter box, a white paper inside. My call up notice? My knees are shaking.

They are out to destroy us completely.

These are all expressed in the historical Etty's words and therefore also contribute to the recreation of the historical person to be re-embodied through performance.

Consider the following three sentences also from page 3:

Spier dug up God in me... the deepest and best part of myself which, for convenience's sake I call God.

I try to look things straight in the face, even the worst crimes, and to discover the small, naked being...

Rilke writes "Because to stay is to be nowhere."

The first two sentences are taken from three different parts of the diary: 11/9/42, 10/8/41, and 29/5/42 in that order. And as far as I have been able to tell, the third sentence containing the Rilke reference has been added. The first mention of God constructs an important moment in Etty's life as does the suggestion that her future

lies beyond the familiar life in Amsterdam. In the next section, I want to look more closely at the function of the Rilke quotation and the question of the representation of time, given the play text's radical departure from the linear time that is the structuring principle of any diary.

2. Temporality

Beyond the diary's chronological structure, it contains memories and anecdotes and thus moves around in time, while Etty herself is located in time and place. The play text specifies that the time of the action is '1942 and the present' and the place is 'Amsterdam, Westerbork Concentration Camp (the Netherlands)'. This seems to suggest that Etty is still located in time and place, but that this is the now of Westerbork, looking back to 1942 in Amsterdam. In fact, the play leaves this more open because of a fluid use of verb tenses, in particular the historical present. If we look again at the play's opening, it can even be read as being outside of linear time.

'Cold on the bare ground of a concentration camp.

Something in me longs for that.

I shall simply lie down and try to be a prayer.'

This idea is reinforced by the subsequent insertion of the diary date of 9 March 1941, the only date in the fragment I am analysing. It is followed by 'Here goes, then' positioning Etty and the audience in the moment of beginning the diary, placing them in the same time frame and thus minimizing the distance between actor and audience since the latter are witnessing events as they happen. The intimate comparison Etty uses to describe letting go in order to commit private thoughts to paper reinforces both this feeling of proximity between actor and spectators and the importance of physical presence. What then follows is the relatively lengthy story of Etty's encounter with Professor Bongers and the latter's suicide, narrated in the past tense since it is looking back to the capitulation of the Netherlands in 1940. This story is followed by a verse from Rilke's *Book of Hours* which, like the opening sequence, lifts us out of linear time. It in turn is followed by another story, this time of Etty's registration as a Jew with the authorities. Although the play text starts with a perfect tense – 'just been to register' – it switches to the historic present in contrast to the diary itself which relates the episode entirely in the past tense. Combined with

the actor's physical presence on stage, this use of the present tense brings both the character and this significant event in her life into the present of the audience.

| <i>temporality</i> | <i>Text p.1 (in order of occurrence)</i> |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Outside chronological time | 'Cold on the bare ground...' |
| Precise date | 9 March, 1941 |
| Precise moment pinpointed | 'Here goes, then.' |
| Past event (1940) -- tense: past | 'I shall never forget Professor Bonger... - ...He put a bullet through his brain at eight o' clock,' |
| Outside chronological time | Rilke quotation |
| Past event (recent) -- tense: historic present | 'Just been to register myself as a Jew.' |

Table 1. Time Structure of the play Etty

The adaptation clearly makes use of verb tenses to lessen the gap between Etty as represented onstage and the audience. The use of intimacy and the body also does this. However, it is only during the passages of shared time outside the world of events - where the gap is eliminated and Etty really is reembodyed.

3. The body

The diary of Etty Hillesum contains very many references to the body, especially her own, frequently recording bodily sensations whether connected with illness or pleasure. Her relationship with Julius Spier involves accepting the body as a resource for improving her mental state. In the letter to Spier that precedes the diary, Etty writes about 'the blood coursing merrily through my veins thanks to your marvellous exercises' (diary typescript, p.3) and her opening section of the diary uses bodily sensations, such as shame and sexual release to convey her attitude to starting the diary, and emphasises how Spier approaches her mind through her hands.

It is noticeable that Etty sometimes translates the abstract into physical terms as in: "Development must not bother with time." These words are of the utmost importance to me. They have become flesh and blood these last few days.' [diary typescript, p. 16] Here we encounter a suggestion that ideas and thoughts are acted on or out through the body. Etty herself thinks that this emphasis on the body is part of being a woman: 'It is true that women seek the concrete reality of the body, not the abstraction of the spirit.' [diary typescript, p. 80] The diary is noticeably frank about female body matters, such as menstruation, pregnancy and abortion. It is similarly open about the frequent aches and pains which are part of Etty's relationship with her body.

Stein's adaptation is highly selective in its approach to Etty's physicality. In the portion of the diary I analysed, Etty's body is linked to her sexuality and the unfolding relationship with Spier. She is portrayed as bold and open to physical experiences and sensations as part of her modern, emancipated persona. Thus the body features as a source of pleasure, strength, tenderness, desire rather than pain and discomfort. The effect of this is that Etty comes across in the opening part of the play as stronger and more attractive than had we been regaled with the more private information about physical ills. It is also the case that in the diary these bodily discomforts tend to be mentioned alongside her mental unease and depression thus giving insight into the mind-body dynamic as propounded by Spier and lived by Etty. The mental ills are also omitted from the beginning of the play, apart from one mention of the early positive effects of Spier's 'illuminating words about my depression' [play text, p. 2].

Conclusion

The analysis of these three aspects of the play text sheds some light both on the newly constructed textual Etty which provides the 'performance score'⁸ and on ways of diminishing the gap between the staged re-embodied Etty and the play's audience. The staged character differs from the historical figure because she is stronger, less prone to depression and physical ailments. So, in answer to my first question, the opening section of the Etty play positions the spectators to admire Etty.

⁸ Tobin Nellhaus, 'Critical Realism and Performance Strategies' in David Krasner & David Z. Saltz (eds), *Staging Philosophy: intersections of theater, performance and philosophy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 57-84.

Almost all the words the character Etty uses are those written by Etty Hillesum herself (albeit in English translation), with Etty's words and inflections expressing her response to the world around her and to events as they unfold. Spectators are confronted with many experiences that fall outside their lived experience: even Etty's relationship with Spier is so unusual as to make many in the audience uncomfortable. And the opening anecdote about Professor Bongers, the epitome of academic authority, committing suicide in response to the Nazis assuming power in the Netherlands, has already set a mood of unease. These are examples of the situations and events the spectator is asked to remember, and as the play progresses, so the spectator's discomfort can be expected to grow.

I think that it is this discomfort felt in the body that helps bridge the gap between one person's past experience and another's prosthetic memories. If it is the case that prosthetic memory is already at work in the adapter and performer of the diaries – Susan Stein – then this is another factor that give power to her embodiment of Etty.

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