

The Other Woman:

A Review of *The Collected Writings of Assia Wevill*

by Carl Rollyson

Assia Wevill first enters Plath biography as no more than a name on a piece of paper blown out of a fireplace of burning letters. She does not even appear with her own name, identified only as Olga in Edward Butscher's *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (1976). Although Butscher acknowledged Olga/Assia as "complex, worthy of a biography in her own right" (350), he could not resist conveying the notion of her as "the archetypal death-seducer stealing away the male idol figure," (350) an image of a femme fatale that has stuck with some readers. In Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1987), Assia first appears as David Wevill's "striking, somewhat older wife," (192) then as "beautiful" (205) and boasting to friends that she would seduce Ted Hughes. In *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (1989) Anne Stevenson, apparently striving to tone down the dramatics, does not describe Assia at all, but instead has both Sylvia and Ted taking to her immediately and then unloads David Wevill's Assia encomium edging into tragedy: "Brave, resourceful, warm, with many shadows." (243) In *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (1991), Paul Alexander seems determined build up and tear down Assia in a single sentence, introducing her as "a woman whose beautiful elegant face more than compensated for what one friend remembers as 'hips like the rear end of a 158 bus.'" (265) For Ronald Hayman in *The Death & Life of Sylvia Plath* (1991), she is an intriguing, displaced person, an escapee from Nazi Germany, much traveled and married

thrice, and in the words of co-workers "full of outrageous ideas, which unlike most of humanity, she did not tremble to fulfill," as well as having "considerable panache." (170) For Diane Middlebrook, in *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath—A Marriage* (2003), it is enough to quote one of Assia's poet-friends who called her "Babylonian," (164) a voluptuous dark-eyed beauty" that put Ted Hughes "under a spell." (165) Yet Elaine Feinstein, a Hughes biographer shifted the burden away from Assia, calling him a "sexual stalker by nature." (126) That was enough, perhaps, for Olwyn Hughes to write off her one-time friend Elaine, even though she had encouraged Feinstein to write *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* (2001).

Not until *Lover of Unreason: Assia Wevill, Sylvia Plath's Rival and Ted Hughes' Doomed Love* by Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev (2007) was Assia accorded the biography Edward Butscher thought she deserved, and which I called "impressively researched and well-told" in the *New York Sun* (February 14, 2007). In *American Isis: The Life and Art of Sylvia Plath* (2013), I noted that at their first meeting, Sylvia was fascinated with Assia and later called her David Wevill's "very attractive, intelligent wife." (191) In *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (2016), Jonathan Bate concentrates on Assia's "staggeringly beautiful face," but adds that she "always complained that she did not have the body to match. In contrast to slender-limbed Sylvia, she was self-conscious of her broad hips

and the thickness of her waist. She was nervous, of German-Jewish refugee origin." (184-85) In 2018, Dina Davis published her biographical novel, *Capriccio* extending and dramatizing our understanding of Assia Wevill as a powerful and tragic figure, drawing on Assia's own poetry.

Heather Clark's *Red Comet*: quotes Plath's obsession with "this marvelous, intriguing woman." (661) In *The Last Days of Sylvia Plath* (2020), in a throwback to earlier treatments of Assia's behavior, she first enters my narrative through Al Alvarez's journal flagrantly trailing Ted Hughes.

Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick building on *Lover of Unreason* in her painstaking *Reclaiming Assia Wevill* (2019), observes "Assia, as either a historical figure or an archetype, would not have been likely to be liberated in either Plath's or Hughes's poems in her role as feminine muse, even if the tragedies and the ensuing trauma had never occurred." Assia, in short, was caught in the crossfire of two powerful poets. "What we do not find in Assia's letters," Goodspeed-Chadwick observes, "is the oversexed demon or rival who was bent on destroying Plath or Hughes." (Chapter 2)

Now Goodspeed-Chadwick has teamed up with redoubtable Plath scholar Peter K. Steinberg to give us Wevill in her own voice, making it once again inevitable that what happened to Plath in her last days, and how she framed those last days, subject to yet another revision.

In their excellent introduction, Goodspeed-Chadwick and Steinberg note the many positive responses to Assia, reversing, as they point out, the "dominant biographical narratives swirling around Plath (6)." In fact, as Plath herself intuited when she met Assia, they had much in common. What the editors say of Assia has been said of Plath, that, in the words of Hughes's friend, Lucas Meyers, Assia was "born to conduct a literary and artistic salon." In her last days, Plath was looking to do just that: attract around her like-minded artists. Wevill wrote poetry and drew (one of her drawings, a self-portrait is included in *The Collected Writings of Assia Wevill*). Both women were displaced persons in postwar England, undone, in part, by those around them who distrusted the posh English accent of a German-Jewish arrival and the sometimes gushing American

consort of an English poet.

The Collected Writings of Assia Wevill is divided into four parts: Letters, Journals, Poems, Miscellaneous Texts. The editors wisely begin with Wevill's letters, which not only feature her own voice without the interpolations of biographers but also show her interacting with friends, husbands, family, and lovers. The letters have an extraordinary impact. Like all correspondents she is suiting herself to the temperaments of her communicants, but she could not have been aware of how her letters, brought all together, would convey a biography in the making that resembles, in crucial respects, Sylvia Plath's. In one of the volume's first letters to Keith Gems, a friend of Assia's first husband, John Steele, Assia mentions reading Mark Twain's books and her envy of Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, admitting her "regret having been born a girl (20)." Plath could be quoted in a similar vein, resenting the boys who had the freedom to go wherever they liked. Both Plath and Wevill, nonetheless, were boundary-breakers, going head-to-head with men in the tough, competitive worlds of poetry and advertising—both women lighting out for the territory, as Huck does at the end of Twain's novel, leaving the comforts, conformity, and hazards of their home grounds and reflecting the sometimes desperate psychology of the escapee, with Plath imagining the plight of a refugee in "Daddy" and Wevill actually fleeing from Nazi Germany. Wevill's competitiveness shocked her contemporaries, but surely it was no more fierce than Plath's? Both women felt they were on their own. To read Assia Wevill is not only to discover a brilliant woman working against the odds; it is also to understand how Plath, in her own register, did much the same.

Like Plath, Wevill reveled in sizing up her surroundings and the men who were after her. She had a captivating light wit, not at all hindered by shaky grammar, describing, for example, the dancing at a Service Club in what was then Palestine (August 2, 1944) when some Canadians show up with their "girl friends" (whores): "I was terrified and decided to leave at once. at that time, the Canadians got near the bar, and showed us what Canadian spirit was like. I sneaked quietly to the Cloak room, took my bag, and ran out; that was the first time that I have seen what jitterbugging was like. I

began to wonder whether these are first signs (of their kind) of deterioration of man kind (23).” (Plug in here a corresponding favorite passage of yours from the Kukil/Steinberg *Letters of Sylvia Plath*).

Wevill’s letters show the same fascination with movie stars like Bette Davis and Rita Hayworth (27, 51) that is to be found in Plath’s diaries. Assia wanted to break out of provincialism, get to England and to art school, and worked away as her drawing just as Sylvia did. You would be forgiven for thinking the following comment is Plath’s, except Sylvia did not have the sister that Assia confides in: “I’m ready for a rejuvenation, and summer clothes and short hair again. I am seriously thinking of dying it blonde, what do you think? certainly I’m having it cut . . . I’m so afraid of shocking mother, though (54).” Year later when Al Alvarez said to me, with much distaste in his voice, that Assia was obsessed with Sylvia, reading these letters explain what Alvarez could not have known: Assia saw her fate awaiting her in the life of Sylvia Plath.

Ted Hughes relentlessly pursued Assia Wevill and just as relentlessly kept putting her aside. “Where have you banished me to this time?” (102) she writes on August 15, 1962, already wondering what place she would have in his life. It is difficult not to see her reacting as a displaced person, anticipating rejection, but this time it was a man fleeing from her, a reversal of her own escapes from marriages that never quite fulfilled her. Hughes embodied the elusive dream of fulfillment, as he did for Sylvia Plath. One letter to Hughes shows the power of Wevill’s pen and of her torment: “when I’m possessed with you, you magically have dispossessed me—and vice versa. When I feel free of you—then surely you want me most—if only there was a way of testing it: It’s Thursday—8:30 p.m. and you are in total possession. Now—now—have you forgotten me?” (105) This letter is undated and the editors propose that it was written “Circa 1962-63” (104) In other words, Assia could be writing this letter while Sylvia is still alive, making her not Sylvia’s successor but her coeval.

On January 22, 1964, Wevill writes to Hughes: “My mood has changed about 6 times today. And this is only 5 p.m. I find it very difficult to accept that I shan’t see you again. That my

future is blanked, with you—that you’re no longer in my life. I want to wind everything up, sell everything I possess, move. Start from scratch. I’m surprised at the anger I feel towards you. I’m convinced you’ve mayhemmed my life. You’ve left me with a rubbishy life—with nothing to salvage. Absolutely nothing (109).” In the same letter, she declares that she will never draw again. In one of their many helpful footnotes, the editors report: “In a January 31, 1964, letter, TH compliments AW on her drawings and urges her to keep sending them to him, even when she cannot post a letter; this letter is held at Emory University (109).” Thanks to these editors we have this kind of information that is not available (by design, I believe) in the published letters of Ted Hughes.

As with Plath, the birth of a child changed Wevill, with the same predictable results as far as Ted Hughes was concerned. Shura was his, Assia told Ted, and sometimes he behaved as if he believed her, and sometimes he did not. He wanted to come and go as he pleased, just as he did in his last months after separating from Sylvia. He did not know what to do with Assia, as her sense of family expanded and his shriveled. Writing to her friend Patricia Mendelson, Wevill described how Shura became a cynosure, “a real child,” Assia kept repeating, adding: “I am ashamed now, to think how ignominiously indifferent I was to Andrea’s infancy, and how I let you apologise for your doting. I was a stupid, seriously flawed bitch-woman.”

At one point, Assia’s father joined her and the Hughes family at Court Green, but he soon departed because Ted’s parents would not accept him anymore than they would accept Assia, and he returned to his home in Canada. Goodspeed-Chadwick and Steinberg quote Wevill’s biographers who comment that Assia “lost a vital ally (115).” Indeed. She was nearly as close to her father as Sylvia was to her mother, and like Sylvia, Assia found herself adrift with Hughes promising to include her in his family but never actually doing so. The irony is appalling: Out of their loyalty to Sylvia, Ted’s parents rejected Assia and her father, the mother and grandfather of their own grandchild, and yet Sylvia mistakenly believed that Ted’s parents had turned against *her*.

On March 11, 1967 Assia wrote to her sister, Celia, in Australia: "Please come to visit me. I cannot tell you what pleasure and reassurance that would give me. We may never see each other again unless you do—now—this year. This summer. I have been, literally suicidally depressed during the past week, and am only just emerging out of it (117)." Celia, a mother with her own responsibilities, could no more undertake a rescue mission than Warren Plath, or his wife, could fulfill Sylvia's plea to visit her after Hughes's departure.

"Ted is exhausted with the war between parents and me, and I seem to be the most expendable factor," Assia wrote to Patricia Mendelson on September 12, 1967. Assia felt "unendurably sad" as she watched her garden wilting. Patricia had never seen it. "All that remains are some photographs," Assia lamented: "Is this all there is to life? just photographs and passports? (126)" She was in a kind of exile that Plath, reading such a letter, would have understood—as well as Wevill's cry in a letter in the late fall of 1967: "It's them bloody artists what bash up womens' souls. I'm telling you (127) ."

Both Plath and Wevill, certain of their powers of attraction, had their share of lovers, turning away many contenders. But eventually it all came down to the Hughes quotient: "No man has ever had this power over me as a woman" (138), Assia wrote in late March 1968. She still hoped to "recover from our Intolerable" and build a "happy loving life together (138)." But by the summer of 1968, she had lost her advertising job and her status as the new generation of advertisers supplanted her, and Hughes still, after several years of searching, had not found a home for them.

By January 1969, Assia Wevill had joined the Sylvia Plath of her last days, writing Celia that it seemed over for her: "The prospect before me is so bleak, that to have lived my full life-span would have entailed more misery than I could possibly endure (155)." In a May 19 journal entry, writing in Plath's Fitzroy Road flat, Assia made the connection explicit: "I can't help feeling that I'm inviting Sylvia's doom on myself (163)."

Meanwhile, nothing could stop the Ted Hughes engine, as a mesmerized Wevill memorialized in

a May 23 journal entry vividly depicting what it was like to live with such a relentless writer—like Dickens able to work in the family maelstrom:

Ted writing: He sits cross-legged, sideways, against Sylvia's black desk (too small for him) a mug of tea on it, sugar bowl, Theresa's sandwiches in one hand, pen in another, writing voraciously, poring through paper-obstacles, breathing through them, his nostrils flared, his hair feathery and leaping forward like a peacock's back-train in reverse, swaying a little as he writes. Rather like a great beast looking over an enormous feast, dazzled and confused by the variety. Frieda's in the bedroom, playing with my trinkets, her blanket with her, sometimes leaning on Ted's knee. Murmuring to herself; saying the "light hurts"—"Make the room brown." "Nicky coming"—exciting herself by hoarding all her possessions into a mound. Ready to protect them against Nick. Ted completely immune to all the noises. My getting up, Frieda's clickety-click presence. He's in a wild fever, in the most absolute concentration I've ever witnessed. He's possessed (165).

Assia Wevill thought she had no talent as a writer! But then she measured herself against Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath.

Sylvia Plath encroached everywhere in Assia Wevill's imagination, and the life Ted continued to project for her had to do with living in "The North," which became the terrain of a horror film, as expressed in the fear Assia recorded in her journal: "The North terrifies me. Big Boulder smashing me. I feel devoid of substance, of self. . . Very near to wild hysteria all morning. Sylvia growing in him, enormous, magnificent. I shrinking daily, both nibble at me. They eat me (168)."

The extraordinary thing about Assia is that she straddled the past and the future, which haunted her, as it did Sylvia, seeing it all so clearly, as Sylvia did, and visiting, as Sylvia did, The Beacon, the Hughes House, which also seems part of the horror show depicted in a journal entry for June 1, 1969:

I feel absolutely alien to him, to them all. I expect one always does. There's nothing as chilling as being in the bedroom of someone

else's family with all its secrets slammed close. In reality his loyalty to Sylvia means that he won't talk about her to me—surely by now he remembers nothing but the tenderest, the freshest, the most ever inaccessible again. (After I leave him he'll move from woman to woman (1973).

So he did, as Sylvia knew he did, as Assia knew he was cavorting with Susan Alliston and others even as he looked for and never found a home for Assia and their child. And she knew how it would end and never end, writing in her journal on June 7: "S his wife. I'm his mistress, for ever and ever."

She tried to reach him and often confronted an edifice of indifference: "He uses the word sentimental frequently, whenever he refers to love between people. He condemns himself. Us, whenever he says it. What he seems to say is that feeling, matters of the heart, matters of my heart, matters of his heart that were, are unworthy of life. Unimportant," a journal entry for August 8, 1969 reports (214). What worked in poetry for Ted Hughes did nothing for the women in love with him: "The tone is harsh but sardonic and utterly controlled. The poet will not yield an inch to sentimentality," wrote Al Alvarez in his *Observer* review of *Crow*. "He says all the kindness and sweetness I loved & married him for was mere sentimentality," Sylvia wrote to Mrs. Prouty (September 29, 1962, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, volume II, 842).

Neither Assia nor Sylvia blamed it all on Ted. They were certainly aware of their own faults, as Sylvia's last letters testify, and as Assia admitted in her journal for September 8, 1968: "It is only inevitably that the life I have lead should end like this. That I should be sup planted (sub-planted!) by others. I was endowed with too many minor qualities, but with neither the will nor huge intelligence to bring them a life of their own (193)." Her periods of depression lengthened. On March 20, 1969 she wrote in her journal: "I am sinking—further and further inwards (194)."

What was Ted saying to her all this time? She reported "terrible talk": "It says die—die, soon. But execute yourself and your little self, efficiently." He told her Sylvia would always be between them and that Assia ought to just take off, which Assia interpreted as a death wish—

the same kind of wish Sylvia had reported in a letter to Warren: "he keeps saying he can't understand why I don't kill myself (*The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, volume II, October 18, 1962, 870)." Assia reported "He feels as though he has already buried me—that feels hideously accurate (194)."

In Part Three, a selection of Wevill's original poems and translations, one poem stands out, showing her gift for making the language of another poet's hers in a kind of commentary on the sensibility that made her such a good friend and interpreter of Yehuda Amichai . Hughes, who relied on Assia to type some of his work and regarded her, like Sylvia, as a collaborator, encouraged her to work with Amichai, sensing an affinity with the Israeli writer. After reading Assia's letters and journals it is difficult not to see her taking her translation of Amichai personally. "In My Time, In Your Place," begins: "We were together in my time, in your place / You gave the place and I the time (231)." The poem celebrates a couple's passion and prophesies "your end with me." Ted Hughes did not end up with Assia Wevill, but she, in her own way, ended with him.

Part IV, Miscellaneous Texts, includes Assia's BBC program introduction to Amichai's poetry in which she spoke of his "mixed background . . . typical of his whole generation (268)" that included, of course, Assia Wevill. She noted how the poems deepened "his sense of the placeless, nation-less, and equivocal mixture of people contained within Israel's struggle to make itself into a rooted nation (268)." Wevill had located her "place" in Ted Hughes, but he had vacated the premises of their passion, and she had nowhere to go. Amichai's poems, Assia wrote in her BBC introduction, express the "weariness of Jewish wandering." Assia felt stranded and could not envision a world in which it would be any better for her daughter Shura, so Assia ended both of their lives. One of Assia's friends explained to her sister: "You are wrong about Shura, Celia, thank God Assia took her with her, she (Shura) loved her Mummy so much and already suffered so much by the instability of Ted's relationship—she would be heartbroken each time he went away again. Assia's loss would have dealt her a blow she could never have recovered from." Who knows? It is not a matter of whether Assia or her friend

was right but that she seems to have thought that way.

Part IV includes Assia Wevill's will with various bequests. She remembered friends, family, and her love for Ted Hughes's children. As to their father: "I leave my no doubt welcome absence and my bitter contempt."

This review has repeatedly put Plath and Wevill in the same situations and seen them as reacting in similar ways to their plight, even though they were quite different women and should not be seen as types. Ted Hughes did not have a type but he did have a *modus operandi*. Sylvia and Assia had a shared suffering with a common denominator: Ted Hughes. His poetry is rife with evocations of both women as doomed—as if he had nothing to do with their destinies. Another writer in much the same position as Hughes, a writer whose marriage also aroused in him thoughts of doom, nonetheless was capable of turning against himself to entertain his role in two failed marriages. Quentin in Arthur Miller's *After the Fall* squares off against Maggie, a stand-in for an accusatory Marilyn Monroe, who in Quentin/Miller's words "suddenly turned on me, calling me cold, remote, it was the first time I saw your eyes that way—betrayed, screaming that I'd made you feel you didn't exist." Maggie could be speaking for Sylvia or Assia and for their reproaches of Ted Hughes. Maggie answers Quentin: "Don't mix me up with Louise!" Louise, Quentin's first wife, a stand-in for Miller's first wife, is as mixed up with Maggie in Quentin's mind as Sylvia was mixed up with Assia in Ted's mind. But here's the difference: Quentin/Miller bear a responsibility that Ted Hughes evaded: "That I could have brought two women so different to the same accusation—it closed a circle for me," Quentin/Miller confess. In Assia Wevill's letters, journals poetry, and translations, she tried to come to terms with Ted Hughes's evasions and her own failings that seared her soul. She needed his help and he was incapable of giving it.

The book is splendidly edited, and I love the cover.

Bibliography

- Alexander, Paul. *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.
- Bate, Jonathan. *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life*. New York: Harper, 2015.
- Butscher, Edward. *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*. New York: Pocket Books, 1977.
- Clark, Heather. *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Knopf, 2020.
- Davis, Dina. *Capriccio*. Sydney, Australia: Cilento Publishing, 2019.
- Feinstein, Elaine. *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001.
- Goodspeed-Chadwick, Julie. *Reclaiming Assia Wevill: Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and the Literary Imagination*. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2019.
- Hayman, Ronald. *The Death & Life of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Birch Lane Press, 1991.
- Middlebrook, Diane. *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath—A Marriage*. New York: Viking Penguin 2003.
- Stevenson, Anne. *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda W. *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*. New York. St. Martin's Press, 1987.