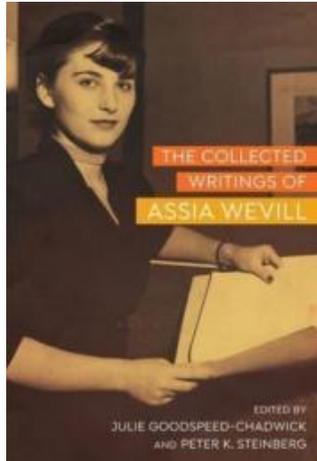


The Collected Writings of Assia Wevill, Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick and Peter K. Steinberg (eds.), Louisiana State University Press, 2021.

Reviewed by Ann Skea.

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Assia Wevill is known to many people because of her relationship with Ted Hughes and her more difficult relationship with Sylvia Plath. There is much gossip about her but, as the editors of this book say, ‘she remains a relatively understudied figure, because of the dearth of primary material available related to her’.

In their excellent ‘Introduction’, the editors, Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick and Peter K. Steinberg, offer a brief but useful discussion of the scholarly approaches that have been made to Assia’s life and work in terms of ‘culturally prescribed’ markers such as ‘sex, race, class, nationality, and religion’. Their stated aim, here, is to present:

...new primary materials that will fuel scholarship on Assia and by extension, Plath, Hughes and Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000); establishing Assia’s significance in literary studies; and making available materials that recuperate or restore Assia’s life and writings as much as possible, while developing our understanding of Assia as a significant woman in literary history, literary biography, and cultural and women’s studies who partnered Ted Hughes and achieved professional successes by her own pen.

First, however, they note that anyone familiar with the work of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, and with the biography of Assia by Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, might be expected to have developed ‘filters and biases’ about Assia. With this in mind, they advise that

We could ask ourselves what kind of expectations we have and how we bring them to bear on Assia, and, by extension, the texts that follow.

This could very well apply to me. I was a friend of Ted Hughes from 1992 until his death in 1998, and of Lucas Myers, Daniel Weissbort and Olwyn Hughes, all of whom knew and liked Assia. Olwyn, in particular, worked closely with Assia on the publication of her English

translations of the Hebrew poetry of Yehuda Amichai. I have studied Ted's work for many years now and have read his published letters to and about Assia; and I have worked closely with his *Capriccio* poems, which are about her and his relationship with her. I have also read Sylvia's poems, letters and journals many times; and the Koren and Negev biography of Assia. So, I will take Goodspeed-Chadwick's and Steinberg's' editorial advice and try to remain aware of my 'filters and biases' as I review Assia's writings.

Since my own area of studies is English literature, I will read this book with a view to determining Assia's contribution to that field. First, however, I must take issue with the editors' claim that Assia was 'perhaps the most notorious 'other woman' in literary and cultural studies'. I think Augusta Leigh (nee Byron), the half-sister of the poet George Lord Byron, has already taken that title. Byron's wife, Annabella, provoked widespread scandal when she instituted divorce proceedings, accusing him of adultery, homosexuality, and incest with Augusta.

The Collected Writings of Assia Wevill is divided into four parts which cover, respectively, Letters, Journals, Poems and Miscellaneous Texts.

Part 1 contains 96 letters. The first was written on Thursday, November 18, 1943, when Assia was a 16-year-old schoolgirl living with her family in Tel Aviv. It is written to Keith Gems, a close friend of John Steel who, in 1946, would become Assia's first husband.

The last letter was written 'Circa January 1969' when Assia was 42. It is addressed to her father, Lonya Gutmann, and was written in London some time before Assia committed suicide, taking her four-year-old daughter, Shura, with her. It begins 'If you ever receive this letter, you will know that I have not taken this decision lightly', and goes on to regret the pain she would give him and to thank him for his kindness to her throughout her life; it also mentions her awareness of the 'criminality perpetrated on my little Shura'. According to Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, who provided the text of this letter (now lost) in their thoroughly researched biography (*A Lover of Unreason*, Robson Books, 2006, pp.204-5), it was written two months before Assia's death and was left on her bedside table.

Assia's letters were written to family, friends, husbands and lovers. They are mostly ordinary, news-filled letters, often practical, sometimes humorous, ironic or passionate, but with no especial literary merit. The first few, to Keith Gems, read rather as if Assia was practicing her English and there are a few errors which reveal that English was not her first language. Koren and Negev write that Assia had English classes for three hours a week when she started Hebrew school in Palestine at the age of 6, and she only began to use it regularly when she went to Tabeetha High School, where tuition was in English. However, Assia clearly had a facility for languages and the English in her letters quickly became fluent and, mostly, correct.

Part 2, contains 28 journal and notebook entries which date from April 1963 to March 1969. Like the letters, I needed to read them alongside the Koren and Negev biography in order to put them into the context of Assia's complicated life, and to know, when there seemed to be sudden changes of locality or thought processes, which country she was in and with whom. I also found it less confusing if I knew which of her three husbands she was married to, living with or divorced from at the time of writing.

The journal entries reveal Assia's thoughts, memories, illnesses, moods, loves, hates and, above all, her doubts and insecurities. On November 29, 1966, she writes 'He's right. I'm idle. And I'm crossed by equal hazy directions'. In another entry, dated November 31, 1966, she records 'wallowing in Sylvia's notebooks'; decries her own 'withering selfishness'; and writes

How the perfect, round, all-inclusive, transcendent words fall away from them like little suns. How clumsy, ugly, angled, halting my own are. My glaring fault in everything. I think everything, but most in writing, is to let the orphaned spangle drop into my lap and then opportunously [sic] let it blow out like a bubble [sic]. Bust? Then bust.

The random notes, according to the editors' footnotes, record quotations from various books; and present fragments of poems which, again according to the footnotes, contain annotations and changes written by David Wevill, Assia's third husband.

A few journal entries show strong moments of descriptive flair and imaginative word-coupling, such as when, in Ireland, Assia wrote of 'sheep and dung-clung cows going about their business'. Describing a six-week stay in Ted Hughes's family home at Heptonstall, she wrote 'a cage with six macaws wearing each other out with noises enough to occupy a whole street. Squalls. Orders. My own preserving indolence'. The most imaginative and literary entry was written when Assia decided to 'burrow into experimental tunnelling [sic]' and began to record vivid, almost hallucinatory, glimpses of her early life in Berlin: 'who is there? rows of wax dolls in Edwardian laces, the candle light power of 39 years muzzling their baby cheeks into frog jowls'. This entry goes on to describe 'the cauldron monsters of Wilhelm KOCH', a German author who seems to have written frightening tales similar to those of the Brothers Grimm.

Part 3 contains 51 poems, only 5 of which are by Assia, the rest are her English translations, from Hebrew, of the poems of Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai. The first two of Assia's poems are competent but unremarkable; the third is a fine, biting satire entitled 'Why Mr. L is not a swine', although the identity of Mr. L. is not revealed and it seems unlikely to have been Assia's second husband Richard Lipsey, who was not 'a Cornishman', as is the subject of the poem. The fourth poem, 'Once there was a large, flat stone', was, as Assia inscribed it, 'FOR TEDDY A VALENTINE. It is skilfully constructed, and tells an imaginative story which is presented in verse form with no regular metre. Assia also illustrated it, as described in a footnote, but it is not included in the small selection of photographs, a few of which show Assia's art work.

It seems that Assia began translating Yehuda Amichai's poems in the summer of 1967 and sent four of them to some 'student magazines'. She went on to translate more, working with Olwyn Hughes to present them to well-established publishers. Goodspeed-Chadwick and Steinberg note that 'two editions appeared in book form: *Selected Poems* (London, Cape Golliard, 1968) and *Poems* (New York, Harper and Row, 1969). These are fine poems, not written by Assia, but their translation into English was largely her work. She had a good ear for poetry, and it is clear from her letters that she loved Amichai's work and discussed a few of her word choices with him. She also told him that Ted Hughes had 'suggested the revised version' of one of her translations and that he had 'seen all the translations and combed them a little'. Hughes, who liked literal translations, wrote in a letter to Amichai

She finished the small book of translations and they're really good, all of them. As soon as she'd gone over them for the last time, I felt I must write to you straight off to tell you how good they were -

they're excellent, in fact. I think they are the best I've seen, of translations of your poems. (Letters of Ted Hughes, Reid (ed.), Faber 2007, p.277).

Part 4 of this book contains 4 miscellaneous texts, including a group-letter to hospital authorities about the state of the lavatories in the Maternity Ward; Assia's unsigned will; and Assia's introductions to Ted Hughes' readings of Amichai's poems for a BBC 3 broadcast on December 12, 1968. Assia's introductions offer biographical information and a brief overview of the tone and content of each poem.

The fourth item is a fragment of poetry, not by Assia but copied from Euripides' Classical Greek tragedy *Hippolytus and the Bacchae*. Feminists and psychologists will enjoy speculating about why Assia chose to record this part of a speech by Phaedra. Literary readers may recall that Ted Hughes' play, *Phaedra*, was published in 1998. It has been discussed as a version of Racine's play of that name and as being influenced by the Ancient Greek writings of, Seneca. Hughes, however, in letters to Keith Sager, refers to Euripides' play (Sagar, *Poet and Critic*, British Library, 2012 pp.214, 278, 280) ; and his outline of Euripides' version of the story of Hippolyta and Phaedra in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (Faber, 1992, pp. 67-74), confirms that he knew Euripides' play well . It seems likely that Assia came across the lines she recorded in one of Hughes' books.

Assia was clearly an intelligent, imaginative and eloquent writer with a critical eye and a good understanding of the rhythms, moods and effects of language. She was also a skillful and creative artist. In her own words, however,

I was endowed with too many minor qualities but with neither the will nor huge intelligence to bring them to a life of their own.

From the point of view of the value of her writing to literature, apart from her translations, this book confirms this.

Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick and Peter K. Steinberg have done a fine job of collating and annotating all they could find of Assia's writings. Some of the work she mentions in her letters – the film script for a short TV play which she wrote and directed, a book she began, and more poetry - remains lost.

The footnotes in the book are meticulous and informative. One on page 90 is, I think, mistaken in suggesting that Assia is 'invoking a dog breed' when she refers to 'a sort of Burmese Landseer view of Pagan'. Assia had studied at the Regent Street Polytechnic School of Art and Interior Design in London and is very likely to have known that Sir Edwin Landseer was a well-known English artist and sculptor. He painted landscapes and dogs, and reproductions of his painting of a stag, titled 'Monarch of the Glen', were once widespread. He also created the lions at the foot of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square.

Overall, Assia's writings offer a vivid picture of Assia's character and a broader view of her life. They will be of scholarly value to those for whom these things are important. Their value to literature, however, is slight. © 2022

Dr Ann Skea is a freelance reviewer, writer and an independent scholar of the work of Ted Hughes. She is author of *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest* (UNE 1994). Her work is internationally published and her Ted Hughes webpages (<https://ann.skea.com/THHome.htm>) are archived by the British Library.