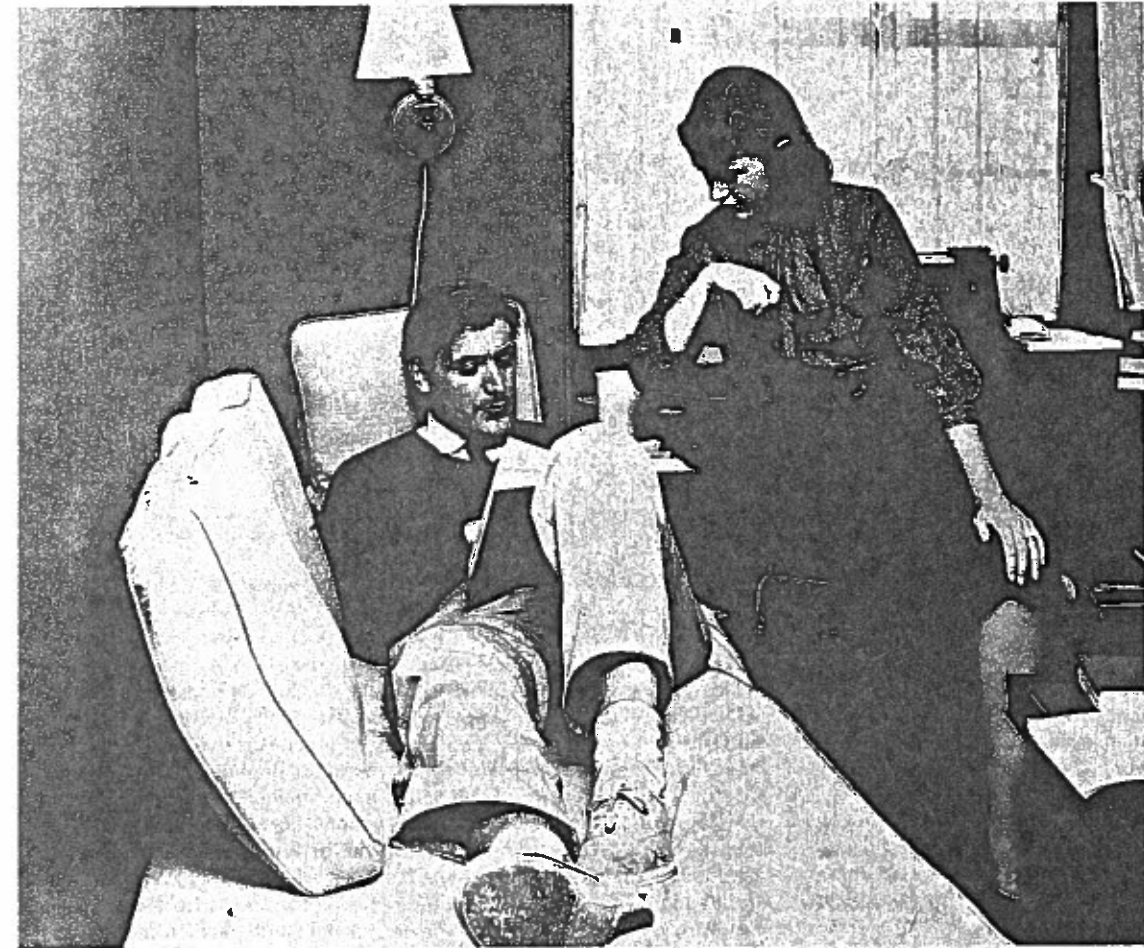


Books

Life&Arts

ded words

life of the poet Ted Hughes raises troubling questions, writes *John Sutherland*



ed Hughes with Sylvia Plath in 1958 — Black Star, courtesy of Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College



Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life

by Jonathan Bate
William Collins £30
Harper \$40
662 pages

'circling crocodiles of Plathians'. Bate has no sympathy with those who have made Plath a feminist martyr — a narrative only fuelled by Hughes's destruction of certain of her manuscript works.

Bate's book, longlisted for the Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction, spends its first 100 pages or so deftly sketching the well-known outline of Hughes's early life. The son of a northern carpenter turned newsagent, he profited by a brilliant teacher at his grammar school to make it to Cambridge. The editor and critic Karl Miller — his Cambridge contemporary — published Hughes's early verse in *Granta*. It signalled his life-long distaste for the austere disciplined, later dominant "Movement" (headed by the "spermicidal" Philip Larkin) and his affiliation with the lustier tradition of Blake, Yeats and Hardy.

The formative event for Hughes came when he met Plath, an American visiting student. At this point Bate's narrative thickens. Like Ted, Sylvia was a poet of precocious promise; and, like him, passionate. They married — imprudently,

as regards money and career prospects. Two children were born. The couple travelled and quarrelled and evolved distinctly separate styles of verse. There were "snarls and bitings", broken crockery, slaps and black eyes. How necessary the turbulence of their relationship was to their evolving arts is carefully scrutinised by Bate.

Possessed of insatiable sexual appetite and film-star looks, Hughes was flagrantly unfaithful. Plath was, his supporters allege, unstable. His most extended adultery was with the poet Assia Wevill — his dark lady. There was, she said, an "animal thing" between them. He was unfaithful to Assia, and others, eventually choosing to marry Carol Orchard, a young woman who had minded his children. In a ghastly echo of Plath's death, the betrayed Wevill had killed herself by gas oven. She took her and Hughes's child, Shura, with her. "All the women I have anything to do with seem to die", said Hughes.

It is too easy to see Hughes as a villain. Bate avoids such judgment and mounts a subtly constructed explanation (it is not an apology). Hughes, Bate points out, "believed that all artistic creativity came from a wound". The wound in his late work, from *Crow* (1970) onwards, was, of course, Plath's death.

Bate draws, as closely as he is legally able, on Hughes's dream journals to argue that he was haunted by her. The image that recurs — one that was played with by Ted and Sylvia in their early relationship — is *Wuthering Heights*. He

is "Hughescliff", she is Catherine, the ghost who will never let go. Bate also suggests, rather less credibly, that Hughes's "infidelity in later relationships was partly a function of his fidelity to the memory of Sylvia". Certainly in his years of fame, married to Carol, his infidelities went beyond flagrant into something resembling satyromania. It is not easy to see it as fidelity.

Bate moves his narrative towards the conclusion that the essence of Hughes's highest achievement is "elegiac" — poetry, that is, in memory of a dead person. And his opus magnum is *Birthday Letters* (1998) — the memorial sequence to Plath published in the year of his death, 35 years after hers. A whole book could be written on the collection, says Bate, using the thousands of pages of manuscript material. That he cannot even quote the printed poems at necessary critical length explains the last section of his book, which is discreetly accusatory about Carol Hughes's care and custody of the Hughes and Plath property she has inherited.

The question Bate's book poses is large and troubling. If Hughes and Plath had not wounded each other and innocent others (children, notably) so grievously, would we have *Crow* or *Ariel*? Probably not. But could we wish these great works unwritten? No. Our enjoyment of them is, as I say, troubling.

John Sutherland is author of 'Stephen Spender: The Authorised Biography' (Penguin)

Follow the money

A young economist hailed by Thomas Piketty sets out a plan for tackling tax havens. By *Vanessa Houlder*

A web of tax havens holds almost a tenth of the world's financial wealth. Evasion by the super-rich has pushed trillions of dollars out of governments' reach. Only by prising open the secrets of the offshore centres can politicians rescue their debt-ridden economies and reverse the tide of rising inequality.

This is the message of a provocative new book by Gabriel Zucman, a 28-year-old assistant professor of economics at the University of California, Berkeley. In Zucman's view, tax havens are a fast-growing danger to the world economy and policymakers need urgently to step up their efforts to curb them.

The Hidden Wealth of Nations promises to make quite a splash. It has a title that echoes Adam Smith and an enthusiastic foreword by Thomas Piketty, author of the bestselling *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, who supervised Zucman's doctorate. It may be too much to suggest, as Piketty does, that "Zucman's work on tax havens is the first serious economic research in this area". But Zucman has broken new ground in a relatively neglected field by using statistical anomalies in data on countries' international investments to chart the offshore world. He estimates that at least \$7.6tn is held in tax havens, largely in what he describes as the "sinister trio" of the British Virgin Islands, Luxembourg and Switzerland.

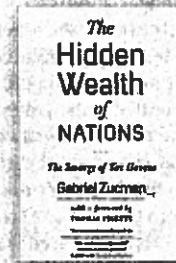
So far, so uncontroversial. This figure is smaller than estimates put forward by campaigners and in line with those of industry analysts. In 2014, according to the Boston Consulting Group, \$10tn of private wealth was booked outside investors' home countries, mainly in Switzerland, the Channel Islands, the Caribbean, Ireland, the UK and the US.

The boldest part of *The Hidden Wealth of Nations* concerns the scale of offshore tax abuse. Measuring this is not easy: Zucman's estimate that 80 per cent of assets are undeclared is narrowly based on some hard-to-interpret Swiss statistics about tax payments made under a recent European crackdown on untaxed savings income. Nonetheless, this allows him to calculate that the annual losses to governments from uncollected income, inheritance and wealth taxes are close to \$200bn.

Zucman joins a debate that has been raging for several years. Cash-strapped governments have already mounted a big effort to tackle evasion and avoidance, as they have sought to address rising tensions over austerity and inequality. Zucman thinks recent proposals for the reform of corporate taxation by the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development are "unlikely to enable much progress". He is more optimistic

about the "very promising" Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act in the US and similar initiatives elsewhere on automatic exchange of tax information. But he frets about the refusal of some havens to co-operate and speculates that regulation might be side-stepped by renegade banks and new techniques.

It seems highly likely that the new transparency rules will not raise anything like Zucman's estimate of lost revenues. But if the latest crackdown is perceived to have failed, it would strengthen the argument for tougher measures. Zucman wants to bolster information exchange with a worldwide public register of financial wealth, recording the ownership of shares and bonds. He envisages that countries would be forced to comply by the threat of massive sanctions, and floats the possibility of France, Germany and Italy jointly imposing customs duties of 30 per cent on Switzerland. With a financial register in



The Hidden Wealth of Nations: The Scourge of Tax Havens

by Gabriel Zucman
translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan
Chicago University Press £14/\$20
142 pages

place, it would be easy to impose a wealth tax at source.

Such a proposal is likely to be viewed as an unacceptable invasion of privacy and sovereignty. But attitudes can change. The trigger could be the economic instability ushered in by a worsening debt crisis. Europeans have more hidden wealth than anyone else — about \$2.6tn, according to Zucman — and large debts that governments are struggling to service. There is already a precedent for more information-gathering. A register of owners of companies and trusts is about to be set up under new EU anti-money laundering rules.

In Piketty's foreword, he urges all those interested in inequality, global justice and the future of democracy to read the book. The wealthy among them might want to take particular note. Attacking tax havens is a crucial first step to ratcheting up taxation on the rich. The more information there is about offshore assets, the harder they will be to defend.

Vanessa Houlder is the FT's tax correspondent

gence was flawed

intelligence activity during the second world war was "inherently wasteful", declares Max Hastings. Spies devoted as much time to

alive as they did to obtaining information. When such agents did manage to pass on potentially valuable intelligence it was often ignored

cance of the various signals that were received from listening-posts in Hawaii in the run-up to the Day of Infamy.

Yet when it came to the Pearl Harbor



**The Secret War:
Spies, Codes
and Guerrillas
1910-1945**

they were Jews". German Abwehr agents overseas often turned out to be low-grade fantasists or bunglers. Those who landed in neutral Ireland were either