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'The End of the Affair': A Correspondence between Valentine Ackland and Elizabeth Wade White, with an Introduction by Ailsa Granne and Peter Haring Judd

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Abstract

This article explores the ways in which Sylvia Townsend Warner ensured that she and Valentine Ackland would be remembered together, specifically focusing on the bequest of poetry books left by Ackland to the Arts Council Library (now the National Poetry Library). It examines the selection of books chosen for the library by Warner, both chronologically as a reflection of different stages of Ackland's life, and thematically as representing her personal interests and poetic preferences. It concludes by considering some of the books themselves, which contain Ackland's handwritten notes and draft poems.

Keywords Valentine Ackland; Sylvia Townsend Warner; biography; twentieth-century poetry; National Poetry Library.

Prefatory note by Ailsa Granne

When researching for my forthcoming book on Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland I came across a copy of some material which I had read in the Dorset County Museum archive but had not included in my PhD thesis.¹ The reason for this was a certain ambiguity about the nature of the material, which was catalogued as 'R (SCL) 1/1. Letter from Valentine Ackland possibly to Elizabeth Wade White' and

'R (SCL) 1/2. Second letter has pieces cut out'. On further reading of these documents it became evident that they represented both sides of a lengthy exchange between Ackland and Wade White in January 1951. On realising the importance of the correspondence I contacted Peter Judd, Wade White's literary executor, sent him copies of the exchange and requested his permission to use extracts from the Wade White texts in my book. Peter readily agreed. On examining the correspondence Peter indicated that he had been unaware of the documents when he had visited the archive in 1995 and, had he known about them, they certainly would have been included in *The Akeing Heart: Letters between Sylvia Townsend Warner, Valentine Ackland and Elizabeth Wade White*.² We both felt that the letters, with their attachments, were important documents in any account of the Warner, Ackland and Wade White relationship, and that it would be appropriate for the full texts to be published. We are grateful to Peter Swaab for his willingness to publish them in this edition of the *Journal*, together with our jointly written introduction to the material, which follows below.

Introduction by Ailsa Granne and Peter Haring Judd

The affair between Ackland and Wade White had begun in the late 1930s, but had ended in 1939 at the outbreak of the Second World War, although the two women continued to correspond. In May 1949 Wade White returned to England and the affair between Ackland and herself resumed, much to Warner's distress. In September of that year Warner left the home in Frome Vauchurch that she and Ackland had shared for many years, so that Ackland and her American lover could live together for a trial period of one month.³ When Ackland and Warner resumed their life together in October, the affair appeared to be over, although Ackland and Wade White were still in touch. In March 1950 Wade White returned to England and Ackland met her in London for a short visit. On her return Warner noted in her diary:

She came back yesterday. 'I can't promise,' she said 'that I won't fall into pits of depression. But it is an end.' ... There is care ahead. Eliz: comes to Dorchester on April 11th and will be about probably during the rest of the month; and must be visited, seen to, allowed for. ... But I believe the essential *No* has been said: the rest must be a bitter assorting of old circumstances to a new order. For yesterday my Love came back to where she has always wanted to

be, only Fata Morgana, and then pity and chivalry and obstinacy and a will not to fail, not to give up, baffled the compass.⁴

While she was in England in March 1950 Wade White had successfully applied for admission to the B.Litt. programme at the University of Oxford to continue her research on the seventeenth-century writer Anne Bradstreet. She began her studies in September 1950 and she and her partner Evelyn Holahan settled in a rented north Oxford flat at 40 Banbury Road.

It is clear from the diaries of both Warner and Ackland that in the aftermath of the affair Ackland was very troubled. So too was Wade White, and sometime in January 1951 she must have written a letter to Ackland reflecting on this. Ackland replied citing 'your long letter which reached me on Tuesday Jan 23th'. As far as we are aware, this letter from Wade White has been destroyed. Ackland replied to it with a letter plus a seven-page attachment (dated 24 January 1951 and headed 'Great Eye Folly') in which she analysed their relationship from her perspective. In her letter Ackland suggests that she is not sure whether to send either the letter or the attachment, but she clearly did so, as Wade White replied to it with a letter and attachment of her own. (See below, Wade White's letter dated 31 January 1951 and attachment dated 28 January 1951, both sent from 40 Banbury Road). In her response Wade White quotes from Ackland's texts, so it is certain that she received them.

In her letter of January 1951 and its attachment, Ackland embarks on a long, detailed analysis of the history of her love for Wade White, before turning to their decisive meeting in London in March 1950, during which, 'in the middle of the night I told you that I must never again, ever in my life, make love to you'.⁵ Ackland does acknowledge the reality of Wade White's sorrow, and, in an attempt to help, suggests, 'if you can take your stand in Now, you will be all right, at last: you will be *really* all right'.⁶ She then describes her own difficult situation, and accuses Wade White of being oblivious to it, concluding that she (Wade White) had never really loved her: 'my instinct knew that you did not love *me* as a person'.⁷ Ackland then reflects on her own struggle to get her life back in order, as she had to do once before in 1939: 'And this time knowing that it really was the end of that part of my life – a part so dearly loved, so deeply enjoyed, so cherished that, by comparison, sometimes, all the rest seems negligible'.⁸ It is surprising – even shocking – to hear her assertion that in comparison with her love for Wade White, all the rest of her life seems at times 'negligible', especially

given that in both 1939 and 1949 Ackland had chosen Warner over Wade White.

At some point in their relationship Ackland and Wade White must have agreed to destroy their letters to each other. Ackland did so, but Wade White retained a number of Ackland's letters. The letter and attachment made available in this article therefore appear to be the only surviving documents from Wade White to Ackland. It is understandable that Ackland wished to retain this particular text, marking as it does the end of their love affair (although not of their correspondence or meetings). What is intriguing is that, upon examination, it is clear that several sentences have been cut out. Given the frankness of the extant text, such deliberate excisions leave researchers feeling both frustrated and curious. The excisions also suggest Ackland may have thought that, at some point, others might read the letter. (She is now, of course, proved correct.)

Wade White's letter begins with the fervent wish that this correspondence may be the last of such "post-mortems" between us', and suggests that Ackland's letter of 24 January 'was actually like a bucket of very cold water poured over my feverish and befuddled head – not to say heart – and after the shock of awakening from that dousing I do feel a little sense of proportion creeping into my consciousness'.⁹ She goes on to thank Ackland for her letter and says that she believes it has done permanent good, talks about books and music, and concludes: 'Go in peace, my heart's beloved, and God keep and cherish you; wherever you are my love is with you always.'¹⁰

The document included with Wade White's letter is remarkable. At its heart is an assertion that she had always wished to be with Ackland, but that in both 1939 and 1949 Ackland had chosen to remain with Warner. She quotes Ackland saying in 1939, 'Sylvia means daily life to me', and describes her consequent growing despair at the realisation that Ackland was 'not free even to *want* to love me as I loved you'.¹¹ She had, she suggests, drawn close to Holahan, 'because I was not Stoic or hermit enough to remain alone for the sake of what I knew even then to be a forlorn hope'.¹² Wade White goes on to make it clear that there had never been the 'slightest shadow of doubt for me, as to whom I loved and where I belonged and wished for always to be', and describes her life, loving Ackland but living with Holahan, as 'a strange double exposure sort of life', a phrase which could be applied equally to her English lover.¹³ Wade White also asserted that '[i]f you had cared enough to want me entirely, and take me entirely, we would have been together, forsaking all others, from the beginning, and no thing and no

person, except our own fierce characters, would ever have had a chance to come between us'.¹⁴ It seems likely that Wade White was being realistic here, not only in her acknowledgement that Ackland was never able to forsake all others, but also in suggesting that the relationship was always at risk from their 'own fierce characters'.

Wade White received her B.Litt. degree in 1953. For almost a quarter of a century following, she and Holahan spent a considerable portion of each year in Oxford, initially in rented lodgings and later in a house on Park Town Terrace purchased by Wade White. In his account of the years after 1950 in *The Akeing Heart*, Peter Judd comments that although the two households held, the letters between Wade White and Ackland continued: 'Elizabeth and Valentine crafted a warm and consoling friendship by letter and periodic visits for twenty years until the latter's death.'¹⁵ It seems surprising that the two 'households' did survive, given the proximity of Oxford to Dorset and the intensity of the Wade White/Ackland relationship between the years 1938 and the early 1950s. Perhaps Ackland's challenging letter of January 1951 had a role to play here. However, in his account of Wade White and Holahan's time in Oxford, Judd offers a further explanation:

Elizabeth had found an element in which to thrive, one with intellectual stimulation, a congenial society, and most of all a framework.... The 'team' had found a *métier* in which they thrived, with an eclectic and varied circle of friends ... radically different than any imagined life with Valentine.¹⁶

In the Wade White papers, there are over 600 pages of letters from Ackland written between 1955 and her death in 1969. They include accounts of presents exchanged, Ackland's discoveries in her antique business, and news of mutual friends, travels and health. They continued to meet in locations such as Salisbury, with the knowledge of their partners but not involving them. Ackland and Wade White appear in their correspondence to have settled into a gentler kind of friendship, one which allowed them to retain the memory of their love.

The four letters and attachments in the January 1951 correspondence – these 'gems of the Human Soul' – follow below in full.¹⁷ It is the authors' wish that these previously unpublished documents will be read with pleasure and interest, and add to the readers' understanding of the complex relationships between Warner, Ackland and Wade White.

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Letter and attachment from Valentine Ackland in Maiden Newton, Dorset to Elizabeth Wade White in Oxford, 24 January 1951. The typescript is marked 'Draft'.

Great Eye Folly.

I have spent time in pondering whether I should send this to you, now, or later, or ever. It has been difficult to decide, because I do not know exactly why I have written it. Superficially, because of your long letter which reached me on Tuesday, January 23rd; but I think that probably this has been shaping itself for some time past.

For one thing, we are artificially separated just now: I mean by that that we do, each of us, with a considerable part of our minds as well as of our hearts, feel that we need to talk. And we know that we probably should not be able to talk if we did meet: or that, if we were able to, the words would almost immediately become transmuted, for each of us, into something different from what they were when they were spoken. Unfortunately, it is very much the same with written words, because the situation appears so differently to you and to me. It *MAY BE* that if you can see it set down in black & white, as it appears to me to have been, you will find it easier to balance the account, as it were, and see how far we disagree. I do not send this, if I send it at all, for any purpose of argument. Obviously that is a stupid waste of time and nervous effort. The effort of writing down even this much, even so diffusely, has been extremely taxing & I would not care to do it again, nor suggest you should do it unless or until you feel it would help you as well as me. It would help me, I think: but I would not have that at your expense.

It is difficult for me, being so often for so long periods out alone, not to hold conversations with you; and of course in those it seems delusively simple to state a case and receive a straightforward reply which I can comprehend! I do not mean that I make you reply in agreement for I do not intend to cheat – but I mean that your imagined replies are expressed by me, of course, & so I understand them without

having to interpret them to myself! No doubt you know what sort of thing I mean – it is very tiring, too, and quite worthless.

If I send this to you, I do not want you to read it with the kind of detective's eye, to search out 'psychological' clues; of course they abound – as they abound in every moment of a man's life. But they only mislead laymen, I'm afraid, & (as I often suspect you know instinctively there is something peculiarly exasperating about having someone come-back with a 'revelation' of what one REALLY means! Aside from this trivial annoyance, too, I think we have been too often misled about each other for it to be funny any more ... No; I wrote this out of a period of seeing very clearly the terrible impasse you are in now, largely through my unwisdom, or my self-deception – and through my fault too. I don't think anyone can 'help' anyone else, except by methods far less crude than analysis or sympathy or discussion or advice: but I do know that love is an indefatigable interferer, & persists in offering any & all of its possessions, in case one of them may be a lifeline.

Valentine

Great Eye Folly: January 24th 1951

I tried to clarify the now-cloudy depths of my memory, about how it was, & why, between us. I could not, waking; but during sleep last night it must have continued to filter itself, & when I woke up it was, for a while, very clear indeed.

Whether that has all thickened again, this is to discover.

I realised as I lay abed, first, that when you say you have 'lost your hope' it is quite true; & that your Hope did indeed remain quite unrealistically undisturbed throughout the extreme variations of your feelings, your mode of life, & the world's disasters, during ten years. To lose something which was, apparently, absolutely unshakable is indeed a profound shock, & it is no wonder you feel yourself unnerved.

This hope was, in a simple analysis, that you & I would come together as lovers again – and timelessly. I do not think it went further into particulars than that, did it? I mean, it did not (unless in extravagance & dreams) provide itself with details of when, where, under what conditions – nor concern itself with What next?

In principle, you took permanency & legality (so to speak) for granted. But without particularising, except when you could not help it, in moods of depression or frustration: & then you were plunged into those dreams of which you often wrote to me during the war years:

when you dreamed you met me & I ignored you: or you waited for me to come into a room, & when I came I refused to speak to you – and so on.

I said this persistent hope was ‘unrealistic’ because, all the while you held it, or were held by it, you were at the same time carefully shaping your ‘real’ life into a pattern of material permanency with Evelyn. First, concerning yourself also with war & political work, & later, or at the same time, tightening family ties, consolidating your position as an independent citizen, starting a ‘business’ to give your self & Evelyn a mutual *raison-d’être* (in the strict sense of the words of that phrase); & you were, from time to time, exchanging assertions of permanency with her (such as references to ‘marriage’ which, you told me, came usually from you) & discarding, at her request, the ring which you had promised me never to take off. During this process of establishing a household & a reason for living, your Hope remained unchanged, for you wrote to me from time to time letters of sadness & separation; and when we finally met again you told me, with strange candour, that you had always considered Evelyn as a link with me – someone I had provided – something by which you were still in touch with me. This – without all the rest – shows the total unreality of your Hope at that time, & as importantly, that the unreality persisted when you had re-encountered me (the ostensible subject of your Hope) & believed yourself still to be in love with me.

I realised, after coming as far as this, that for my part, I fell in love with you *afresh*; but that, as I think, your feelings did not change from what they had been towards me when we parted. I do not know when they had changed, whether at parting, or when I was in N. Carolina, or even at Warren, but they were certainly very different indeed from what they had been when we were first in love together, in 1938 and early ‘39.

That I fell in love with you *afresh* is important, for my state of mind was therefore not entangled with tradition, as it were. I had not, evidently, kept an unfluctuating idea of you, nor yet kept anything like a positive hope. I had been much more severely damaged by what, to me, had been the grave shock of your ‘infidelity’ – using that word in the most commonplace sense, than ever you realised at the time, when we had met again. When I found that you were quite insensible of the damage done, & ignorant of the *consequent* change in me, I was only *interested* – a little shocked, perhaps, & curious to know how such things could be – but it did not affect any image of you, for I had none alive in my mind. If there had been such an image, this discovery that you were without comprehension of what had happened to someone you loved,

directly through you, would have had some extreme effect: either it would have blown everything sky-high, or it would have made me very differently in love with you. As it was, Elizabeth in 1949 came to the place Elizabeth in 1938 had filled, & filled yet, but did not *fit* it. And I was passionately, violently, & *newly* in love.

Theoretically, you saw me 'changed', you said, but theoretically I was still myself: this is what you told me – except that I have added the 'theoretically'. In fact, I think you saw nothing at all but the solid mountain view outside your window, which was your so-far-unmoving Hope. It didn't even change to become a realised hope – And yet, the word implies something to come: so, unconsciously perhaps, you went on waiting for it to arrive. But in fact it had happened already: we had met: we had come together: eventually we made love. But the landscape for you remained the same, & you continued to see only that same reliable Hope.

You have an untrusting, & I a changeable character; but I don't think you failed to trust me because I am changeable: I think you could not trust me (as you could not trust anyone or anything else) because you had spent all trust you had upon that Hope. I have known you trust people, & circumstances, but only when you didn't, in the bottom of your heart, care about them. I have seen that trust vanish completely, directly you have realised that, for one reason or another, you'd be badly off without the person or the circumstances. Directly you knew you needed someone or something, you ceased to be able to believe in its reliability.

If this is true, then at some time or other you must have become aware of me, as distinct from the personification of your Hope. I think that happened on May 12th, 1949. On that day, & the previous night, we each experienced something – *and I made the first fatal mistake, of thinking that we had experienced the same thing.*

And if I am right, when you became aware of me, two things happen[ed] in rapid succession: you experienced a great joy, illumination of joy because you had seen someone else, and that someone else was the person you loved – not just the person who loved you, but the person you loved – And directly after that, you felt a terror of mistrust and dread of loss.

I, making love to you after so long a time of not making love, & with a powerful illusion that you were not the same as the one who had been spoiled – but yet the same – a redeemed, transfigured love, perfectly free from the blemish of act or the equal blemish of the consequences of the act: with this strange confusion of feeling, which in fact

made it seem very much as though we had both died and both got rid of everything but pure joy and health – I had no thought at all, but everything became illuminated for me by what I never doubted to be the purest of lights. And with the fatal error made (that you experienced precisely what I did) I went confidently into the maze, and took you with me.

Because I thought that everything was now beyond ‘handling’ and must go on along its own path which led, I was sure, to perfect integration of us together in love. If I thought in words at all, which I scarcely can have done, it was this, or something like this, that I thought. And if I had any doubts – they were caused (rightly) by realising from time to time that this situation – so calm and tranquil and purely good for us – was disaster and world’s end for others . . . But whenever I thought of this a kind of calmness came upon me which I interpreted as a reassurance: as a reminder that in miraculous events one must trust the miracle.

That I believed this whole-heartedly is proved, I think, by the fact that I was believed; even you believed me, or believed something for a while – and for a considerable time I was unshakenly confident and able to communicate confidence even strongly enough to overbear despair.

Then blow after blow fell, & what had seemed perfectly strong began to break up. I don’t know what happened to you during the time you were away while your mother was ill, and when she died: but your letters were almost word for word the same as letters you had written me ten years before – when I left America for England and the war, and you set up house with Evelyn.

I did not realise – even though I know this & actually compared the letters, and recognized in myself the same sick fear – I did not realise that, now, I had no ‘new’ Elizabeth, but that, if she had ever been, she had reverted and I – myself ‘new’ to the extent that I had been changed by the disaster of 1939–40 – was hoping impossibilities and believing incredible things, and heaping responsibilities of real-life love on someone who had only one love in the world, and that an unreal ‘hope’. How I could have failed to understand is only explicable if I accept that I *did* know and did deliberately refuse to admit this. And here is my deep guilt. But I don’t see any other way out – I must have known, and I did not accept the knowledge.

You came to me in September. Preparing the house for you I still insisted to myself that it was a deliberate ‘trial run’, to find out if you could be happy with me in my kind of life, and if what had seemed

unmistakably good, in May, remained so in September and would remain so afterwards.

I don't know what you had in mind when you came: not a permanence or a try-out of permanence, because you left your travelling case always on the floor of our bedroom – This is not such an unimportant symptom as you will think it.

We were very happy in love together, but we have each various things in our memories which the other one said – things we noticed and feared, or resented. You have quoted some of mine to me since: phrases which, to you, meant that *I was different from your hope*. I noted things (like the travelling case) which showed me that you could not step out of the past – that you lived still in the state of being unhappily in love, with a fantasy future to hope for; and that you never for a moment realise that the hope must be discarded, because it was done with and *Now* had begun.

Then you went back; & in our last conversation together at St. James' Court you told me that you were used to living in hope, and asked what I thought would be the next step? And I said I did not know. That was a revelation to me: I had not realised till then that I did not know. It was the second time I became guilty, for I should have gone on from there to question myself until I did find something that I knew. But I fell back on my 'confidence' which, by then, was as unrealistic as your Hope.

Then a period of desperate letters, and steady increase of distance between my idea of the situation between us, and yours. Then your letter about Evelyn, and I suddenly realised that I was back, confronting the Elizabeth I had so desperately thrust away from me, in 1940. And this time I was not ignorant of why I felt like that; before, I had gone up & down in my feelings about it – at one time plainly detesting that kind of behaviour and immediately persuading myself that 'things were like that' and 'that's the way people are –' And always driven by my own extreme desire, to condone anything so long as the poor desperate lust within me could have something to live on. Now it was the same but I was not the same, and I could not condone what, for me, was base.

I went over our letters, so far as I could, and over events, and realised that even when, to us, things had looked angelically bright, the results had been either altogether black or clearly stained. We had not produced, even from our most care-free loving, any fruit that was not bitter or bad. I knew that what to me was 'base' might be all right for you or for anyone else: but then, how could I be all right for you, if you

seemed base to me? Your letters did not show me any understanding of this dilemma and I decided that, odd as it seemed, it must be necessary to plant the seed and grow the tree before, by its fruit, one could tell if it were good or bad in its beginning. So I agreed we should meet in March and by that consented to what, to me, seemed badness: for, plainly expressed, it was either arranging to condone adultery or arranging to commit adultery – according to whether you considered yourself really in love with Evelyn or with me.

That, you see, was a far cry from May 12th –

All this, so much concerned with ‘legality’, was quite alien to the greater part of my being; but one part of me has always been beset by this – which most of me thinks is nonsense: and although I have never been in the least concerned about how many, or what kind of lovers any mistress of mine has had, yet as far as my desire for you has been in question, it has been completely blotted out by repugnance, when you have even so much as talked of lying with someone else. (Remember Rat’s barn, and Douglas? Remember Alexander?)

But I came to London and met you, and we did not refer to any developments in our situation, but were together in deep love and profound relief, that first night. But in the morning – Oh you will remember that. The fruits were plain to see. And yet nothing whatever had happened between us, in our love-making, to give us any sign that it would turn to that heavy despair and what I still declare was *hate*: for all day, if you remember, you walked about in heavy and stubborn misery, and that next night you asked me to make love to you, and I did – and there was my third guilt, for by then I had had my answer: I had discovered for sure what I had come to find out. And in the middle of the night I told you that I must never again, ever in my life, make love to you. But did you understand at all? I don’t know. I shall never know now, unless something very strange happens to us both in the time to come.

Thinking of all this, in the morning as I lay in bed just now, I realised that you were indeed bereft, for what you have lost is not me, not any person you love, not belief in a person or belief in love – but the one thing in which you have really trusted: the thing which you believed would always be there: the Hope – whose essence was that it would never change its nature, and so would always remain exactly where you could find it, exactly as you knew it to be. And now it has gone through the process of becoming – ‘One day, perhaps –’ has passed through ‘To-day!’ and you did not even know it had. Now you are left with the reality, which is always Now, and you find it alien, and turn – at this

time anyhow – to the less-dangerous Then – and I am afraid for you that the extremely dangerous To-morrow may trap you, if you get yourself away from the past. But if you can take your stand in Now, you will be all right, at last: you will be *really* all right: and I believe that it is what you are trying very hard to manage. . .

I was left in a state which, if you had been aware of me, you would have felt compassion for, I think. I had incurred great guilt; I had – God knows without intention – deprived you of your dear Hope; I had re-awakened the passionate longings which, ten years before, had really wrecked my mind and spirit. There is much more to it than this, and it is significant that you do not have the least idea of it, nor has it ever entered my head to tell you of it – There, too, is another instance of what I am afraid must have been wilful delusion: for if I had *dared to enquire* I should have known, by that one fact as by the others I have told you about earlier, that I did not truly believe you loved *me*: I knew you loved, but I had these proofs, staring me in the face, that my instinct knew you did not love me as a person. . . If I had believed you did, I should have told you about things which love could understand, and heal, and which love needed to know. But it never came into my head to tell you – and yet, officially, so to speak, it was of the utmost importance and concern to you.

Well; in further proof, I suppose, I will not go on with this matter of how I was left, more than to say that from March onwards I had to go back over the ground and clear away and re-set and, as far as possible, get back into order the very place that, ten years before, had been devastated in a like fashion. And this time knowing that it really was the end of that part of my life – a part so dearly loved, so deeply enjoyed, so cherished that, by comparison, sometimes, all the rest seems negligible.

Now, ten months later, the surface looks as clear as it did ten years after the last disaster, and I am standing again in *Now* and that is all that must concern me. But this is not to say that I do not know quite well what it is that makes your nights, as you say, often a torment to you and your days heavy and almost unendurable. Your solution to the problem is, you tell me, ‘acceptance of life’ and you imply that mine is exactly the opposite: but that is not correct, either way. Just getting into bed with someone else isn’t ‘acceptance of life’ and just refusing to isn’t denial. We have both continued to be alive and continued to love and continued to take what comes. There must be differences for both of us, between now and ten years ago, in the way in which we react to what has befallen: for instance, what was a mixture of bitter disillusion

and personal fastidiousness, which made me abhor any thought of you, ten years ago, is now something purely private to myself that has no reference whatever to you: it is not *you* and it is not abhorrence... it is strictly confined to myself, in the sense of 'This I must not do -' and would be exactly the same if it applied to any other kind of action, whose fruits had proved it to be bad. Obviously, your reaction has altered too, because we are older, because we are different, because our circumstances (in your case your material circumstances, in my case immaterial ones) are totally changed from what they were ten years ago.

That is about all I can usefully set down from the long, ledger-like accounts I saw, of our state, as I lay in bed this morning. It has become long enough, in all conscience, & I'm afraid it is difficult to read. But this – with everyone else left out, as far as possible – is how I understand things to have come about. I may have left out more than the other people involved – but I have not meant to give any impression of self-justification or self-blame; I do not believe that anyone alive on the earth is capable of awarding a verdict of Guilty or of Not Guilty. We simply do not know. But I can see, of course, very plainly in the consequences, and almost as plainly in my own conscience, that I have both committed and consented to sin – if sin is the word; and the degree of guilt, I suspect, is computed by the degree of knowledge, and that is where human judgment breaks down. We do not know how much we know, nor how we refuse, knowingly, to know. I am afraid, and I think with reason, that I carry a heavy guilt. But that does not concern you.

I don't yet know whether I shall send this to you, now or ever. Such things aren't often of much use to another person. It might be useful to you to attempt a similar assessment – but now may not be the time. It could be useful to you, if it seems to you to fit the facts (and facts, God knows, are relative creatures!) to know that your lost hope was of that nature. But obviously it wouldn't be any use at all if it didn't seem true to you. So we shall see what we shall see.

In dealing with May 12th I tried to be what you would call 'objective' but it is difficult; for what I felt, what I experienced, then, has taken its place for me; it does not change, nor diminish, nor become obscured or invalidated by later happenings. As to that, at any rate, I am not in any kind of doubt: it was absolutely true; it happened as it seemed to happen; the previous night, and that mid-morning happened and can never be changed. That is my position, as regards that event: it may not seem to be of any importance to you now, but I think it must be of the greatest importance to you for ever.

The thing now is to do all that can be done, & to invoke mercy and compassion, and justice too – for one must venture all things – to ensure that what then happened between us, at least, will never be turned to your hurt or to my hurt – or to the hurt of any living creature.

Letter from Elizabeth Wade White to Valentine Ackland dated 31 January 1951, with attached letter dated 28 January 1951

40 Banbury Road, Oxford

31: i: 51

My darling,

It has taken me, as you will see, quite a few days to complete the attached document, faulty and *incomplete* as it is. I hope, with your agreement, that it may be the last of such ‘post-mortems’ between us. I know that I precipitated this exchange, with my letter of misery to you, but I believe that at considerable cost to both of us, it has done permanent good, because your statement of the 24th was actually like a bucket of very cold water poured over my feverish and befuddled head – not to say heart – and after the shock of awakening from that dousing I do feel a little sense of proportion creeping into my consciousness, along with the fervent hope that I shall never again complain or whine to you as I have done. This does sound rather head-tossing, doesn’t it? I don’t mean it so in the least; what I mean is that at long last I really do see things in the light of reality, as you have so often begged me too [sic], and as a result I am better of course and I’m sure you will be better too, for this final clearing up of the mists of nostalgia and pain that have lowered between us. You may indeed feel a strong impulse to reply with arguments and elucidations to what I send you herewith, but I ask you not to do so if you can help it. You wrote me a description of how it was for you and how you thought it was for me, and I accept your account of your own experience but have, at your suggestion, be it recalled, told you once again, in great if confused detail, how it was for me. So that is that and let us let it be, shall we, and turned to the *Now* as you say and do the best we can with our separate lives and with what eternally remains to us from loving so passionately, turbulently and, for me at any rate, eternally. I don’t of course know and it is probably better not to guess – what the future in a long sense holds for us, but I do know the next step, which is quite logically for me to thank you without further delay for yet another kindness of the familiar everyday

kind which you have so long and generously given me, and which is the stuff that the best of life is made of.

I mean for your thoughtfulness and real effort, in the midst of many cares, in sending me the Edrisal. It is a wonderful comfort to have this; I am often tormented by a headache and these tablets are more help than anything I know. I wish you would *please* let me pay you for the full and generous supply you have sent. And tell me if you think of anything, at any time, that I can send you. I am most apologetic about *Male and Female*, and will get it off to you soon along with one or two other books that I will write you about. This is a confused term so far; I have hardly touched the mountain of work I have to do, what with feeling so low in body and soul until last week, and thinking continuously of your letters and my reply, and listening to the insidious B.B.C.; we've rented a radio and heard such good things: a talk last week about Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, music by Stravinsky and Beethoven and Bach and who not, and Ben Jonson's 'Alchemist', and tonight T.S. Eliot reading 'La Figlia che Piange' and some other most beautiful poems – do you know the little one about Usk in Wales from 'Landscapes'? And another curious experience – I don't suppose your enchanted tower is within any sort of reach of a cinema-theatre where foreign films are shown, but if so and if you could manage to see Cocteau's 'Orpheus' I think you would be as magicked by it, perhaps, as I was. It is surrealism that is poetry and art and makes strange and moving sense all through, at least it did to me, maybe because I have lived in a surrealist world for two years now and know how true the double-exposures of love and life are. Do see it if you possibly can, and tell me what you think of it.

I haven't yet been able to beg, borrow or steal a copy of Berdyaev's *Autobiography*, but in time I will, to read the pages to which you referred me.

It is a pity that Ruth cannot come here for a week of rest, but I do understand her anxiety to keep at her work and think it is important for her to do so even at heavy cost to her strength. She writes that she will come to Oxford for a night, on th[e] 20th Feb., and I've replied urging her to do so unless when the time comes she feels it will be too tiring or complicated, in which case we'll work out another date for meeting. I do want to see her and believe I could give her a pleasant short time here.

How cold it has been these past few days. I do hope you are managing to keep warm. Write me about it when you have a little time, and do not fear for me anymore; I am all right now. Go in peace, my

heart's beloved, and God keep and cherish you; wherever you are my love is with you always.

Elizabeth

40 Banbury Road,
Oxford

28: i: 51

My darling,

Your letter, and long enclosure, of the 24th, seem to me a sincere and painstaking endeavor to state your case, undertaken largely out of concern and sympathy for me because of the deep trouble that made me write you as I did. I want you to know that I am very grateful for the statement from you, and that it has, in a clinical sort of way which was inevitable I suppose, helped me a great deal.

I am not going to attempt anything in the nature of a parallel resume from my side of the court-room, so to speak, because that would have to be an infinitely detailed autobiographical document such as I have not time to write nor you to read. And I do not indeed propose to offer any arguments or rebuttals to anything in your statement, because that, as I take it, is quite honestly the way it seems to you now, and certainly I am in agreement with a large part of what you say. But there are a few factual errors in your appraisal of my thinking and behaviour over the years that I must at least point out to you, in the hope that they will incline you to revise a little your sweeping judgment of me and also perhaps of the entire nature of our relationship.

You say that you agree that I have lost my hope, and that you have realised that 'your Hope did indeed remain quite unrealistically undisturbed throughout the extreme variations of your feelings, your mode of life, and the world's disasters, during ten years.' Then you say further along 'I think your feelings did not change from what they had been toward me when we parted... but they were certainly very different indeed from what they had been when we were first in love together...' Then 'You have an untrusting... character; ... Directly you knew you needed someone or something, you ceased to be able to believe in its reliability... If this is true, then at some time or other you must have become aware of me, as distinct from the personification of your Hope. I think that happened on May 12, 1949.' (I give these consecutive quotes as they tie in directly with what I am now, without bitterness I assure you but with deep sorrow, obliged to say.)

I began seriously to lose trust in you shortly before Christmas of 1939, when, following a letter in which you said I was the one you wanted most and asked me what I was prepared to do about it, and my equivocating reply, you wrote 'Sylvia means daily life to me.' I took to my bed then and was ill for several days with extreme despair, not realizing alas, as I do now, that it was perfectly logical and consistent *for you* to do that. And I sent you a cable saying not to write again until you had a letter from me, which upset you very much – do you remember this at all? Evelyn came to see me at that time and I first then became aware of her inarticulate friendliness and compassion, although naturally nothing whatever was said about the reason for my being laid low. I continued through the next few months my efforts to find a way of getting to England, but I was persuaded to carry through the Tri-State Conference in April, 1940, and by the time I went to Washington, in May, to ask for my passport, the German invasion of Western Europe had started and I was categorically denied permission to come over and take the job Robertson Scott had offered me.

I was 'brought up', I mean not only traditionally by parents and teachers, but also in my whole-hearted reading of the great romantics, the Brontes, Hardy, Meredith, Hawthorne and the rest, to believe that deep love between two people led naturally to marriage, unless one of them was tied to someone else, in which case either that one gained freedom from the old union or, if that was impossible, the two bade each other farewell and separated forever. I had read little in the eighteenth century and so was naively unaware of a pattern of manners and morals very different from this. I was, when you took me in love in 1938, sexually very innocent and very passionate, revolted by promiscuity of any kind, terrified by the knowledge that I was a Lesbian, and deeply tired and lonely from having so long resisted, with uncompromising instinct, the pressures of my environment to marry someone I did not love, because I knew that I must keep myself free and clear until I found my own person.

There were many layers of nightmare in that hideous winter of 1939–40: the ghastly physical starvation of my need for you, and of having been brought at last into the full life of my strong body and then violently bereft of its expression in love, the terrible constant anxiety for your welfare and, worst of all, the beginning of despair and hopelessness, for by then my mind did know, against all my heart's and soul's determination to believe, that you were not free even to *want* to love me as I loved you. In the winter of 1940 Evelyn said to me 'I am in love with you' and I said 'But you must not be; I am in love with Valentine.'

And she said 'I know that, but let me do what I can for you.' That is how, as I have told you, we came together, because I was not Stoic or hermit enough to remain alone for the sake of what I knew even then to be a forlorn hope. There was not the slightest shadow of doubt for me, as to whom I loved and where I belonged and wished for always to be, and then began a strange double-exposure sort of life, in which I clung to you with all my heart's instinct and desire, and planned and plotted ways to get to England and be with you, and at the same time lived with Evelyn, and Janet there with us too, and felt the happiness and reassurance, even in the darkness of war, of making a home in which I was loved and wanted. I should think you would understand this better than you have been able to do, for a number of reasons, and yet I also comprehend, knowing you as I do, how deeply wounded in sexual pride and sense of possession you were by this development in my life. But you must realize, my darling, – do you not? – that if you had cared enough to want me entirely, and take me entirely, we would have been together, forsaking all others, from the beginning, and no thing and no person, except our own two fierce characters, would ever have had a chance to come between us.

So as it was, I must put the next thing bluntly and say that if I had trusted you, in late 1942, I would have trusted myself to be brave enough to come to England with the Red Cross when they offered me the opportunity. But at the time of final decision I knew how it would be, in the midst of *real* war, with only clandestine meetings for us and you going home to Sylvia and no home anywhere anymore for me, and I realized that I simply couldn't take it. That was a very bad time, but out of it came my job with Russian War Relief, and I worked hard on that for almost three years and then we went to the country. If I had still, when the war ended, had any solid thread of concrete hope that we would come together again, as you say, 'as lovers, timelessly, with permanency and legality', I would have been on the first boat, or rather I would have been with you long before the war's end, you may be sure. No, but without hope, I was still and forever deep deep in love with you; I was restless and unhappy in the country, in the midst of a busy life; I planned to come in 1948 but changed on account of Mother's illness, and when I did come in 1949 it was with the clear knowledge that I could not, and did not really want to, ever live with you, because of the vast differences, as well as dangerous likenesses, in our characters and temperaments, and with equally clear, purely romantic and quite irresponsible knowledge that you were my own person, my beloved and destined love forever, and that I must, whatever the cost, come and

find you and look at you and touch your hand and hear your voice once more in my life.

This was, I am now sure, very wrong of me, but truly it was done without any 'materialistic' motives; the most I expected was that we should meet in love and remembrance and part in peace, and I would return to America and that would be that. You will remember perhaps that I said to you, while I was having my breakfast in the Acorn's sitting-room: 'I do not believe that we could ever live together', and you replied sadly that you did not know. I am sure I was as surprised as you were to discover so breathtakingly the renewal of your love for me, and the upset of everything else that it meant for both of us. The rest of that time in England was a tempest of emotion for me, with Evelyn in hell beside me and my own heart and soul on fire with the glorious passion of rediscovered and affirmed love. Then at last we were together for those three overwhelming days in May, and if I ever believed anything in my life I believed in you, *in us together as one*, then, at the King's Arms in utmost physical union, on Warden Hill in the strange ecstasy of the joining forever of our two spirits, [*about two lines excised here*] Never doubt, my Valentine, and never fear; whatever we are and whatever else we have done or will do in all of our lives in all our lives, that was the time of transcending truth for both of us. The shadow that came over me for a little time on one of those nights, that you misinterpret now, was simple human sorrow and dread, of the pain of being parted from you so soon again, of the anguish that I was inevitably bringing to others, and of the sad long time of separation that seemed to stretch before us.

So I went away from you in the early morning, and [*approximately two inches of text excised*] back to America, with you, consuming everything that had been concrete in my life to unreality. And up to the middle of that cruel summer I watched my Mother dying and Evelyn breaking her heart, and knew beyond any doubt or pity that I belonged to you and with you and all that mattered was to get home to you at last. You say 'I don't know what happened to you during the time you were away while your mother was ill, and when she died'. No, my darling, no one knows what happens to another one at a time like that, and when it is accompanied, first with the unescapable realization that in the midst of that elemental sorrow one's desperate heart is elsewhere, and then with the dreadful blow of disinheritance, there is only the unspoken language of love and compassion to encompass it. But you were suffering too much yourself, even at the time when you were imploring me to come to you as quickly as I could, for always, to

be able to meet that challenge. Even so, I came as soon as I could, and for as long as I could, accepting my destiny with clear recognition of all it involved because I knew that my first loyalty and responsibility were to you. And by that time you knew again, although you did not tell me until I had been with you for some time that you could not leave Sylvia. My suitcase on the floor of our bedroom was a symbol to me too; I left it there, with my clothes in it, because you did not tell me where I could hang them and I could not bring myself, for fear of the pain it would give us both, to ask you if I might put them in what was obviously Sylvia's wardrobe. And I remembered how I had lived like that for three months, in that same room, long ago, and it was a sad and ironic memory for me.

For one month in my life I lived alone with you, in a house which was, in spite of everything, home to me for that time. There are no words anywhere to describe the poignancy and majesty of the happiness I had then; eleven years, and all the rest of my life, are a pittance to pay for that one month in 1949, and for three days in May of that same year.

Well, you know how it was after that. In October *Sylvia gave you an ultimatum*, and in the act of accepting it you repudiated me. Yet even at that same time the old pattern had its final repetition: you wrote and asked me what I would do if Sylvia left you, and I replied that I would give my life into your hands, reserving only a few months of each year to be with my Father while he needed me. You then wrote that there was no question of a separation from Sylvia, and asked me to come to you under those circumstances, and because I took a little time to recover from the shock of this and tried to make a coherent reply to it, and asked your generous help for Mrs. Craske in the interval, you wrote to me in deadly anger that you would never again try to make any sort of life for us together. In the meantime I had written you a long letter in which I struggled to explain to you that I was not made of the sort of material to live in dishonesty like that, that I understood at last that your union with Sylvia was something which could not be broken, and that I begged you to let us try to recognize each other's separate obligations and needs, and for the sake of our dear and true love endeavor to be together for some little time in each year, as best we could manage. When your letter of rage and dismissal came, crossing this, I thought that you must be terribly ill or somehow completely misunderstanding of me, and in desperation I telephoned you; you will remember our conversation, and your letter that came soon after saying you could not plan to be with me for occasional times because it would interfere with your work and your writing too much. And that was all, and in that

winter of cold abandonment and humiliation and black despair I tried again to find some comfort in the love and pity that Evelyn offered me, and because I was really mad with grieving for you I found of course no comfort at all. And in continued madness I decided that I must fight my way back to some sort of wholeness by being in England, that beloved country, for a time alone, and if I could do that, and get on with my book as I had managed to write that article in the midst of the torments of hell, I would perhaps be all right. It was typical of my disordered state that I agreed that we should be together in London when I first arrived, knowing too well what your attitude toward me had become, and that to be with you like that, in a strange hotel, and then have you go away and leave me alone, might well be the end of me. God knows I killed myself in my mind a hundred times, preparing for that trip, and then I thought that if it were my destiny to kill myself for love and loss of you, there was nothing for it but to go on and fulfill that destiny. So I came and I was ill and it was a nightmare for both of us, and you left me and went home to Sylvia, and I became more ill in London and you became ill in Dorset, and Ruth's good doctor, thanks to you, rescued me, and you spent a weekend being very kind to me but completely gone away, and then Evelyn came and that was really the end for us, in this life at any rate, was it not, my darling?

I say 'in this life' advisedly, because I owe a debt to you which cannot be measured in terms of the brevity and incompleteness of human experience. I owe a deep apology to you as well, not for any deliberate or willful wrong I have done you, but for lack of wisdom from the very start. I am *not* an untrusting character; on the contrary I go too far in trust, placing too heavy a burden of expectation on those I love and then breaking my heart when they prove unable to bear it. This I have often done, but never more passionately nor determinedly than to you. Browning said: 'Oh, to love so, be so loved, yet so mistaken -'; I am not the only one to have trusted love to perform miracles that it could not. From the very beginning you have had a hard life, my darling, and because of the violence that was done to you in your defenseless adolescence, and thereafter, it was not possible that you and I, by the time we met, could have achieved an integration of our separate needs in life and love. Yet what we did achieve, in the fleeting incandescent moments of our joy together, and the long years of enduring love apart, is far beyond my power to estimate or describe, is only to be given thanks for with utmost humbleness and awe of spirit. For even though you could not give me all your love, in the shared journey of every day, as in the shared discovery of our few marvellous

nights and days together you had the glorious courage to let me give you all my love, that since I was first aware of life had burned so fiercely in its dungeon within me, and in the surrendering of that fire once and for all to your hands and your lips, in every way that a body and soul knows how to surrender, I found a freedom and glory of immortal being that no words ever put together, even by the greatest poets, and only a very few exalted phrases of music, are able even to suggest. There is little more to say, my darling; this is a queer answer to the analysis you sent me, and though written at great pains it falls far short of what I wished it to be. But it will show you at any rate how very different a picture, now that it is all over but the remembering, and the love that regardless will go on and during, each of us has of our twelve years' experience. Indeed I wish that the treasure that is left in your hands, after the battle, is as pure and priceless as what is left to me, but I fear it is not so and for that I am deeply sorry. For my treasure is unchanging love, without any illusory demands or expectations or dependence anymore at all, please God in his mercy, but with utmost tenderness and concern for always, so that I tell you now most seriously, and ask you to remember it and act on it, that if ever you need me, or anything I have or anything I can do, in any way for you, all is yours for the asking. There may yet be ways, and I pray God to let there be, in which I can partly or even wholly repay what you have done for me and blot out some of the unhappiness I have caused you, and the uncharted years that lie ahead of us.

And so God bless you now, and keep you in his care and mercy, my own.

dearly beloved Valentine.

Notes on contributors

Ailsa Granne completed a PhD at the Centre for Life-Writing Research at King's College London in 2015. Her book *Life-Writing, Genre and Criticism in the Texts of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland* will be published by Routledge in 2020. Before becoming a student of English Literature Ailsa worked in the NHS as a hospital pharmacist and later as a general manager.

Peter Haring Judd is an author, actor, genealogist and memoirist; as cousin to Elizabeth Wade White, he was also her executor and shaped her epistolary exchanges, diary entries and family information into *The Akeing Heart*. His website is www.peterhjud.com.

Notes

- 1 Ailsa Granne's book *Life-Writing, Genre and Criticism in the Texts of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland: Women Writing for Women* is due to be published by Routledge in 2020 as part of their series *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature*.
- 2 This was originally self-published with Amazon by Peter Haring Judd as *The Akeing Heart: Passionate Attachments and their Aftermath: Sylvia Townsend Warner, Valentine Ackland and Elizabeth Wade White* (Peter Haring Judd, 2013). It has been revised and republished as *The Akeing Heart: Letters between Sylvia Townsend Warner, Valentine Ackland, and Elizabeth Wade White* (Reading: Handheld Press, 2018).
- 3 For further details, see Chapter 7 of Judd, *The Akeing Heart* and also Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989).
- 4 Claire Harman, *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner* (London: Virago, 1995), p. 163.
- 5 Unpublished letter from Valentine Ackland to Elizabeth Wade White, including a seven-page attachment dated 24 January 1951, Dorset History Centre, Dorchester, Dorset.
- 6 Ackland to Wade White, 24 January 1951.
- 7 Ackland to Wade White, 24 January 1951.
- 8 Ackland to Wade White, 24 January 1951.
- 9 Unpublished letter, Wade White to Ackland, 31 January 1951, including a four-page attachment dated 28 January 1951, Dorset History Centre.
- 10 Wade White to Ackland, 31 January 1951.
- 11 Wade White to Ackland, 31 January 1951.
- 12 Wade White to Ackland, 31 January 1951.
- 13 Wade White to Ackland, 31 January 1951.
- 14 Wade White to Ackland, 31 January 1951.
- 15 Judd, *The Akeing Heart*, 'Introduction', p. 2.
- 16 Judd, *The Akeing Heart*, p. 383.
- 17 The phrase 'gems of the Human Soul' comes from William Blake's 'The Mental Traveller', line 33, and is used in the epigraph to Judd, *The Akeing Heart*.

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