Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath: an astrological reading

Part Two: rites of mourning? The life and work of Sylvia Plath

"That quite separate entity in her, a true daemon, an independent, energised centre of which the moon was the totem and which had gathered into itself all the pain of her early life, was emerging at last. It provided all the illuminations of the poetry. At its heart was impending death, sometimes an image of rebirth through death".

Ann Stevenson, Bitter Fame, paraphrasing Ted Hughes

"For Plath, creativity is intimately associated with mourning: hence the persistent echoes, throughout her work, of Ariel's song from the Tempest, 'Full Fathom Five thy Father Lies'".

Christina Britzolakis, Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning

"Because she was brilliant, articulate, overtly ambitious, energetic, efficient, organised, enviably resourceful in practical matters, blessed with a hearty appetite and (as she herself said) 'an athletic physique which I possess and admire', she seemed infinitely stronger than she actually was".

Dido Merwin, quoted in Ann Stevenson, Bitter Fame

SYLVIA PLATH'S COLLECTED Poems attracted widespread critical acclaim and secured her recognition as a major poet. Unusually for a posthumous publication, the book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. An enthusiastic consensus acknowledged the power of her work. Rather than reading back from her suicide to find "scripts of illness", it could now be seen as unmasking the verbal strategies of "sane" discourse. Plath had taken language into territory that left others speechless.1 There have been dissenting voices, however, arguing for instance that she had no subject matter beyond herself, that she would not have come to public attention had she not taken her own life, and that her Ariel voice was the product of possession by an angry and destructive spirit. It's a strange commonplace of astrology that a birthchart continues to reflect fluctuations in the native's reputation beyond their death. When Plath's Collected Poems appeared on 28 September 1981, Pluto was just three minutes of arc from square natal Pluto, with progressed Moon on that point. What might have been a period of mid-life renewal witnessed instead a re-evaluation of her work. A new Moon in Libra on the 27th had proceeded to one minute of arc from natal Moon at noon on the day of publication.2 This appearance of Moon and Pluto as signifiers for Plath's artistic project seems consistent with her eighth-house Scorpio Sun and unaspected Dark Moon.

Ted Hughes' account of his first wife's poetic talent emphasises the unusual clarity of its root system, a deep inner crisis whose symbolism appeared to go back at least as far as her father's death when she was eight years old, and her unusually precise and systematic way of attending to it. In his view, this core process had a life of its own, largely unaffected by the upheavals of everyday life. Its mythical dimension emerged decisively during her first suicide attempt, at the age of twenty, when she lay undiscovered, in darkness and almost dead, for two days - which he extends to three, inviting comparison with the Dark Moon, Inanna's captivity and release, or Christ's death and resurrection. After this nadir, Hughes traces periods of gestation and rebirth, and interprets these as evidence of a natural and positive process that was heading towards the birth of a new creative self.3

The Scorpion's kinship with the wrathful aspect of the Great Mother, who destroys life before it can be renewed, is echoed and reinforced by the Dark Moon's association with the cyclic phase of death and rebirth, with transformative inner work, personal underworlds, and processes such as menstruation, which break down, purge, and release.4

For Demetra George, images of the Dark Goddess constellate around a "self-directed, uncompromising, powerful and impersonal" red pole in a woman's sexual cycle. Menstruating women have often been maligned as bitchy, hysterical, furious, and irrational.5 The Wise Wound, Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove's influential book on menstruation, was going to include a final chapter on Plath. They were personal friends, but although Ted Hughes enthused about the book and approved "the Menstruous Traveller", it was dropped from the final text.6 Judith Kroll discusses the Moon as the central symbol in Plath's mythicised tragic drama, and identifies the disquieting Moon-muse of the later poems with Hecate, death aspect

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of the triple Goddess. Two years after her father's death, Plath's bereaved mother, burdened with responsibilities, was hospitalised with a gastric haemorrhage, and a ten-year-old Sylvia had recurrent dreams of losing her as well. She soon acquired Sara Teasdale's Dark of the Moon, and became preoccupied by her (and Virginia Woolf's) suicides. Plath's late poems echo Teasdale's imagery of lost love, grief, and death.

Sylvia Plath's writing about childbirth broke new ground. Her accounts of psychiatric incarceration had a significant cultural impact, black comedy enlivens her verse, and revenge is a recurrent motif. By the early 1970s there was already discussion of her 'death cult' popularity. Various testimonies describe a propensity for risk taking, an intense jealousy, and silent Medusa-like rages. All of this feels decidedly Scorpion like, Plutonian, and lunar. But astrologers need to be mindful of the dangers of reading back, not least because a haunting line about fixed stars governing a life, written ten days before her suicide, has been taken to indicate astrology's complicity in teleological explanation, and in Ted Hughes' presumed resort to a celestial alibi in particular. We should not let knowledge of Sylvia Plath's death completely overshadow our perception of a life, which although foreshortened, was productive, and not without its share of joyful intensity. That said, however, many biographers and critics regard Plath's preoccupation with her father's death as a dominant theme, to the extent that her work has been described as "an extended exercise in mourning." I propose to focus on this core theme in order to raise questions about what Michel Foucault terms 'disciplinary power,' and about the extent to which personal fate appears astrologically predestined.

Some other features of the horoscope are readily apparent. Plath's unsuspected Dark Moon suggests a markedly autonomous and inward-looking impulse, but is located in peacemaking Libra, and in the seventh house, the sign and house most fundamentally concerned with relationship. This important marker of the imaginative life of a writer, and of habitual emotional defences, therefore encodes a sharp ambivalence about needing others. Given that the Moon’s disposer Venus is also in a crowded seventh house, widely conjunct Jupiter and the South Node, which are in turn conjunct Neptune (JU-O-SN = VE/NE, with JU and NE in detriment and VE in fall), a search for perfection in establishing a secure sense of selfhood. Creativity and success would be hard won. Mercury is predictably strong, aspiring six 'planets' (including Pluto and Chiron) and the Moon's nodes, and conjunct JU/SA midpoint (aspiration/duty, elation/despair). Plath kept a serious journal from the age of seventeen, by which time she succeeded in getting a story published at the fiftieth attempt. Mercury closely square Mars indicates a propensity to use language as a weapon, so it comes as no surprise to find her describing words as axes.

So far so clear, but when approaching a life and corresponding body of work as variously portrayed as that of Sylvia Plath, some theoretical reflection is arguably unavoidable. Some early accounts crudely medicalise the poet and her work, reducing both to an effect of psychosis, narcissism, hysteria, or manic depression. Others bracket her as a confessional poet, or resort to teleology involving either narcissism, hysteria, or manic depression. Still others frame her as a protestant of risk taking, an intense jealousy, and silent Medusa-like rages. All of this feels decidedly Scorpion like, Plutonian, and lunar. But astrologers need to be mindful of the dangers of reading back, not least because a haunting line about fixed stars governing a life, written ten days before her suicide, has been taken to indicate astrology’s complicity in teleological explanation, and in Ted Hughes' presumed resort to a celestial alibi in particular. We should not let knowledge of Sylvia Plath's death completely overshadow our perception of a life, which although foreshortened, was productive, and not without its share of joyful intensity. That said, however, many biographers and critics regard Plath's preoccupation with her father's death as a dominant theme, to the extent that her work has been described as "an extended exercise in mourning." I propose to focus on this core theme in order to raise questions about what Michel Foucault terms 'disciplinary power,' and about the extent to which personal fate appears astrologically predestined.

When Michel Foucault developed the notion of genealogy, he shifted the register of his enquiry beyond hermeneutics, the exposition of meaning within and between discourses, to encompass the effects of cultural practices. This significant epistemological move enabled him to demonstrate that disciplines such as psychiatry and psychoanalysis constitute and govern the subjectivity they purport to explain and heal. The project of inciting confession in order to decipher deep meaning, essential truth, or hidden origins, is itself a cultural construction, a strategy that perpetuates particular relations of power. In 'Medusa,' a poem addressed to her mother, Plath likens herself to an x-ray, but this graphic image of over-exposure could equally apply to the degree to which the minutiae of her life have been reproduced for us as a public archive, in which even much of the poetry is dated. Wendy Brown extends Foucault's insights, arguing that because women have traditionally been "constructed and positioned as private, sexual, familial, emotional," the voicing of women's experience acquires a confessional cast, but should not be assumed to give access to unimpeachable truth, or to be inherently liberating. Given Plath's fierce reference in Lady Lazarus to voyeuristic interest in personal crises in terms of a macabre strip-tease, this kind of perspective is clearly relevant. The poetry itself leads us into a terrain of ethical and political discussion, and provokes
reflection upon the will-to-knowledge within astrology. An astrology informed by Foucault would take account of its own confessional cast, and the implications of any disciplinary tendencies and borrowings.

With this in mind I considered keeping two versions of the horoscope in play, but after due deliberation opted to stay with the Aquarius variant. I wasn't finding much evidence that Plath met the world in a sensitive, empathetic, and self-effacing Piscean way. The Aquarius chart emphasises the detached intellectualism, independence, and rebellious spirit of Uranus, but also directs us to a core narrative involving the sign's traditional ruler Saturn, in the twelfth house square natal Sun, and therefore to Plath's considerable self-discipline, perfectionism, efficiency, and determination to succeed, as well as her tendency towards self-doubt, insecurity, and despair. As a student, she maintained a "cool, aloof, distant" façade, and seemed keen to conform to norms of middle-class propriety. Her signature autobiographical motif of the Bell Jar, a vivid image of confinement, objectification, dissociation, and asphyxia, derived from experimental science, corresponds well with the co-rulership of Aquarius. At first sight, Plath's writing appears highly self-revelatory (Uranus), but many critics emphasise the carefully crafted theatrical personae she adopted in order to control, protect, and experiment with her autobiographical material. Both major midpoints are with Uranus, which is conjunct the 'black centaur' Nessus, and closely square Pluto. The most enduring legacy of her parents' marriage (Sun/Moon) appears to have been the shock and rupture occasioned by her father's death. In The Bell Jar, Plath juxtaposes the electrocution of the Rosenbergs with an account of electroshock treatment, based on her own retraumatising experience. In horary, a late degree suggests that it's too late to change a pattern of events. Might this Ascendant degree show Plath's sense of impending death, and of being drawn repeatedly towards crisis and rebirth?

Full Fathom Five
Those "fixed stars" in Plath's late poem govern from the bottom of a pool, an image associated with her long-dead father. In various poems she adopts the persona of daughter-in-mourning, an Electra devoted to her dead father's memory. (Full Fathom Five, Electra on the Azalea Path, The Beekeeper's Daughter, The Colossus, Little Fuge, Sheep in the Fog). Her almost successful suicide attempt is described as an attempt to return to him. Given that both the Sun and Saturn conventionally carry aspects of paternal symbolism, we would expect this story to unfold around natal Sun in Scorpio square Saturn in the twelfth, and her Sun's dispositor, Pluto. The former is strikingly reflected in Christina Britzolakis' "Colossus", of a father she had scarcely known as a healthy man. But he retained an attitude of 'rightful' dominance towards her. He was very much the 'self-made man', and eventually became a professor of entomology. Plath's mother Aurelia was also of German extraction, but twenty-one years his junior. She had been a student on one of his courses, and despite his pacifism he retained an attitude of 'rightful' dominance towards her. They were never able to talk things through, and the marriage was organised around his career. If Aurelia wanted to entertain friends, she would draw a plan of Otto's books and papers on the dining table and replace them carefully before he came home from teaching. Sylvia described her father as an autocrat whom she both adored and despised.

In the autumn of 1936, the family moved to Winthrop, near Sylvia's maternal grandparents' seafront home. Progressed Sun was about to make its first contact with another planet, applying towards sextile natal Neptune. Otto's health deteriorated, but having lost a friend to lung cancer after five operations, he refused to see a doctor. The children were increasingly kept away from his outbursts and moaning in pain. When they did see him, for about half an hour before going to bed, it would be to perform and recite poems. Fortunately, Sylvia was close to her grandparents. Their house and the adjacent beach became a refuge. By 1940, Otto's illness was diagnosed as advanced diabetes mellitus rather than the cancer he had feared. A leg was amputated, but on November 5th he died from an embolism. His eight-year-old daughter declared that she would never speak to God again. At this time Pluto, planet of the underworld, was transiting square her natal Sun (orb 11 minutes of arc). Transiting Sun was conjunct progressed Sun, both opposed by a transiting Saturn-Jupiter conjunction. As natal astrologers we would surely have been surprised if such a shadowing of both natal and progressed Sun had passed without some rupturing experience of paternal deprivation, and might wish to contemplate the clarity with which this formative event was marked in a child's horoscope.

Otto Plath's death was also signified by transiting Neptune trine Sylvia's twelfth-house Saturn, and transiting Jupiter-Saturn trine her Neptune. The Sun also picked out a figure particular to the 29 Aquarius chart, involving progressed Descendant, the child's evolving sense of the other, conjunct progressed Jupiter-Neptune midpoint, symbolising idealisation, fantasy, and art. Nearly two years later, on the day before her tenth birthday, with Saturn squaring natal Neptune, the family moved inland to Wellesley. Anne Stevenson comments that "the family's move away from the sea dramatically sealed him in a moonstruck, glassed-in compartment of Sylvia's imagination, where he evolved into his godlike/devil-like manifestations... the frightening ghost of a father she had scarcely known as a healthy man". But he would inexorably surface in stories and poems as "a Colossus, a seagod-muse, a drowned suicide, an archetypal Greek king, a bee-keeper... even a fictitiously brutal combination..."
of husband and Luftwaffe-Nazi. The Tempest was the first play Sylvia Plath was taken to see as a child, and remained a talismanic text. She chose Full Fathom Five as a provisional title for her first collection of poems. Natal Sun square 12th-house Saturn aptly signifies an intimate link between creativity and mourning. According to Britzolakis, many of the early poems are elegiac. A 'lost object' is transformed into an artefact, and consolatory universal significance is found in images of natural process. Such compensation is gradually spurned, however, as Plath's poems increasingly resemble Baroque tragedy, with its death's head imagery, its rejection of catharsis, and its refusal of redemptive significance. Mourning becomes ostentatious display, an end in itself. Passions become stage props. Walter Benjamin refers to this kind of self-absorbed melancholy as "the saturnine vision of a state of creation without grace."

Although Britzolakis rejects psychobiography, her "melancholic" reading of Plath's poetry remains closely indebted to Freud, and the problematic distinction he makes in Mourning and Melancholia between "normal" and "pathological" mourning. In the latter, which Freud calls melancholia, the locus of loss is obscure. The condition is said to be characterised by a marked inhibition of performance, loss of self-esteem, and a tendency to derive satisfaction from self-exposure. There may also be "manic phases". A split-off critical agency makes overwhelming demands upon a fragile ego, and in extremis impels suicide by turning an unacknowledged murderous impulse against the self. After a session with her analyst, Plath found in Mourning and Melancholia a close description of the motivation behind her suicide attempt, but identified her draining vampire figure as maternal.

For Freud, melancholia arises when an "object relation" is subjected to shock. "The shadow of the object falls upon the ego", producing identification with the object. Since Plath's relationship with her mother had been claustrophobically close (they had had to share a bedroom during the daughter's adolescence), she was clearly not a 'lost object' in any literal sense, neither was Sylvia's rage against her lost from consciousness. Astrologically, Freud's explanation seems to fit natal Sun squared by critical Saturn, a primary signifier for the lost father.

Rites of passage
Rather than entering into a speculative knowledge game, however, I want to put the function of Freudian discourse itself in question in relation to both biography and astrology. Although melancholy is quintessentially Saturnine, and Sun-Saturn contacts can be read as signifying tension between light/conscious and dark/repressed aspects of selfhood, this astologically plausible revelation of superficial secrets, and Plath's endorsement of it, might also be understood as constituting her subjectivity as a good patient, and concealing another equally significant story, that of her encounter with psychiatry, which also resonates with natal Saturn in the twelfth. However much Plath's poetry might overturn Freud's sexist
symbolic order, the fact that she came to identify with a Freudian explanation for her suicide attempt after consulting a text almost certainly prescribed by an analyst who had supervised her incarceration five years previously, suggests that we need to look beyond depth hermeneutics here.

In June 1953, Sylvia Plath, then twenty years old, returned exhausted and disillusioned from a month as a guest editor on Mademoiselle magazine in New York, to find that she hadn't been offered a place on a writing summer school at Harvard. At a time when few women could envisage a career, her whole upbringing had been orientated towards high achievement, so this unaccustomed setback precipitated a severe crisis of confidence. She stayed at home, but found herself unable to write poetry, make sense of Ulysses, or work on her thesis. On the 14th of July, her journal records thoughts of murdering her mother and ending up in a straight-jacket, a financial burden on her family. During this crisis of hope and expectation, Jupiter, which rules and squares natal Midheaven, had entered her fourth house and was squaring natal Jupiter. Transiting Pluto was on natal Mars square Mercury, and quintile natal Sun, with the Sun conjunct, and progressed Sun trine, natal Pluto. She experimented with self-harm, and told her mother that the world was so rotten (Pluto) she wanted to die.

A total lunar eclipse on 26th July 1953, conjunct the South Node and opposite a retrograde Mercury, fell square Sylvia’s natal Sun. Set for Boston, the eclipse chart’s ruling planet Mercury also rules its Midheaven (a writing career), is semisquare and dispositor of Jupiter (in detriment in Gemini, and conjunct Venus) in the tenth (Plath’s Mademoiselle experience?), and about to station opposite natal Saturn (writer’s block). Transiting Saturn-Neptune opposes, and Uranus applies square to natal Uranus, with SA/NE precisely on natal Sun/Moon midpoint (the death of a sea-god separating her parents), suggesting depression, loneliness, and a “tendency to torment oneself.” The forming Uranus square is, of course, associated with the impatience, independence, and radical self-expressiveness of young adulthood. On the day after the eclipse, a psychiatrist, who reminded Sylvia of a boyfriend she didn’t like, diagnosed severe depression and prescribed electroshock therapy on an outpatient basis. On the 29th, the treatment began. Even with anaesthetic, muscle relaxant, and after-care (none of which she received), critical mental health practitioners now question the ethics of offering an intervention that works by inducing brain damage. The experience left her with a tenderness in the temples that never healed, a lifelong terror of E.C.T., and severe insomnia. After several sleepless weeks, she quizzed friends about suicide methods.

On the 24th of August, a full Moon fell on Sylvia Plath’s Ascendant, with the transiting Saturn-Neptune square Uranus configuration pressuring natal Uranus square Pluto, and Sun/Moon. Saturn was now closely square natal Pluto, having been exact the previous day. Pluto was still transiting natal Mars quintile Sun. After attempting to drown herself in the ocean, she decided on a course of action familiar to readers of The Bell Jar. At around at around 2 p.m. on the day of the full Moon, she left a note saying she’d gone for a long walk, and took a large number of prescribed sleeping pills. In the novel, she deploys maritime imagery to evoke the dimly lit cellar and her protagonist’s loss of consciousness (Saturn-Neptune squaring natal Pluto).

After two days she was discovered only just alive, having vomited up some of the pills, with an open wound on her right cheek. She was taken to hospital, transferred to a psychiatric ward, and then to a private psychiatric unit where she remained until the 13th January 1954. Ted Hughes’ portrayal of this sequence of events as an underworld journey was informed by anthropological accounts of rites of passage, in which the candidate’s death is followed by some form of resurrection. These have commonly entailed a period of seclusion, symbolic descent and burial, hypnotic drinks that induce unconsciousness, and physical ordeals, all designed to make the initiate forget their past. After such ceremonies the novice may have to be taught once again to walk, eat, and dress. Rites for an aspirant shaman would also emphasise inner, ecstatic experience. There are some striking parallels here, and Hughes drew on comparisons between the Bardo Thodol and Jungian analysis, while strongly endorsing Plath’s own description of her encounter with psychiatry as a grotesque parody of meaningful initiation.

Her period as a detained patient is signified by Saturn’s transit square her Saturn-Pluto opposition, confirming the appropriateness of its natal placement in the twelfth house of sequestration. On her first day at McLean, an almost twenty-one-year-old Plath met a twenty-nine-year-old (and hence presumably saturnine) Ruth Beuscher, a psychoanalytic psychiatrist who became her therapist, mentor, and lifelong correspondent, but who also supervised insulin therapy, further E.C.T., and a dehumanising institutional regime. Plath had lost the ability to read and write, and had to be taught to recognise letters again. This suggests that (as Pluto squared natal Mercury) electroshock might have radically compounded the writer’s block that had been a major focus of her distress. On the 13th October, with the Saturn square transit 16 minutes of arc from exactitude, Olive Higgins Prouty, a benefactor who believed that the suicide attempt was primarily attributable to the initial electroshock, complained about “the long objectless hours” Sylvia spent in her room. She requested a move, but the hospital authorities proved intransigent. With Saturn transiting Plath’s Sun (in late November) Prouty again complained that she found little change in her protégée’s depression, and that she usually found her “wandering listlessly up and down the corridor”. The hospital justified this, and their use of chlorpromazine, as a respite from the family’s constant pressure to achieve. When Prouty threatened to stop paying, they waived their fees, but decided that more E.C.T. was needed. This was administered during mid-December, and either provoked or coincided with a marked lifting of Plath’s mood. Since by this time Saturn was separating from natal Sun, and progressed Moon was sextile Jupiter, it looks as though recovery – from iatrogenic as well as emotional injury, could have been facilitated less invasively.

Sylvia Plath’s experiences clearly need to be located socially and historically. Her life and work might have been very different had she not lived during the mid-twentieth century, in the aftermath of the atrocities of the Second World War, at the high water mark of psychiatric incarceration, before the emergence of a psychiatric survivor movement, and immediately preceding second wave feminism. Even with counter-sexual Uranus natally opposite and transiting square Sun/Moon midpoint, it would be hard to make sense of her subsequent mythologisation of electroshock in terms of possession by a male muse, an electric god who purged her of femininity and released her creative self, without reference to a cultural climate in which Adlai Stevenson exhorted her female graduation class of 1955 to write laundry lists rather than poems, and which appeared to offer her an impossible choice between emulating unmarried career women or...
Ariel presence in mythicised form as a sea-god. Natal twelfth-house Saturn, seeming to link the lost relationship Ascendant-Descendant axis. On the day she tried to join him in destructive subjectivity "or "schizophrenia"), the Plutonian in vain against a fundamental pattern of tragedy, and death.

Patterns of fate? Astrology and teleology
How, then, might the astrology inform ongoing debates about the relationship between Plath's "self-destructive" subjectivity and her writing, in which madness and suicide have sometimes been presented as the telos of her career? According to Ted Hughes (writing in 1986), Plath's true daemon brought a sense of impending death and periodically threatened to kill her, yet illuminated her poetry. Her work was alchemical, and the emergence of her Ariel voice synonymous with her rebirth among the ruins of her father. The power of those poems carried her to the cup of triumphant survival, but a perverse combination of unfortunate circumstances precipitated her suicide during a moment of exhaustion. In Birthday Letters, however, a more fatalistic account emerges, along with the astrology, in which a purposive and protective level of selfhood struggles in vain against a fundamental pattern of tragedy, and death ultimately triumphs in the shape of her father.

Although the electroshock experience appears to have galvanised Plath into serious suicidal intent in 1953 (and for this reason alone it's surely misleading to talk about "self-destructive subjectivity" or "schizophrenia"), the Plutonian synastry between father and daughter lends some support to the notion that their relationship was also implicated. As already noted, his death was marked by a close square from Pluto to her Sun. His Sun falls square her Pluto, and his Pluto squares her Ascendant-Descendant axis. On the day she tried to join him in the underworld, an almost full Moon animated this latter aspect, falling on her Ascendant and square his Pluto. Furthermore, we find composite Sun quincunx Pluto, with the former on Plath's natal twelfth-house Saturn, seeming to link the lost relationship with her hospitalisation. So, might there have been unconscious rage against him? Pluto's transit across Sylvia's natal Mars, activating its quintile aspect and mutual reception with her Sun, also squared Otto Plath's Neptune, signifying the father's confused fear, sickness, physical disappearance, and continuing presence in mythicised form as a sea-god.

In Solar mythology, when Apollo seized the Oracle at Delphi by slaying a dragoness or giant snake (the Python, Scorpion), he secured co-operation from the underworld by creating the Pythia, a human-female intermediary. Combining the gifts of Apollo and Hades, she would enter a trance state by sitting over a chasm and breathing noxious vapours from the depths. It so happens that the oracle is a recurrent figure in the psychically gifted Plath's exploration of "the mythic origin of voice", a place of imagined plenitude where authority is continually idealised and attacked, dismantled and reconstructed. In various poems she invokes the dramaturgy of initiation, rebirth, or sacrifice. E.C.T. becomes a parodic trope of oracular possession, and her father appears as a broken statue speaking a mysterious language. (On the Decline of Oracles, The Colossus, The Stones, The Hanging God.) Britzolakis notes a tension between Plath's aspiration towards a Lawrentian deep' voice, and an Arnoldian imperative to preserve some impartiality when observing nature. This tension finds ironic expression in Medallion, a highly formal poem about a dead snake, which relates to Plath's slaying of the chthonic female deity, and her usurpation of her oracle.

Plath, who once declared she was going to become a seer, knew that bees were also involved in oracular tradition. The Pythia was known as the Delphic Bee. Demeter's priestesses were called bees. The three Fates were referred to as the three Bees, or bee-maidens. At Delphi, the Omphalos was shaped like a beehive, or the birth cone of the womb. Given that Otto Plath had been an authority on bees, and had regarded the hive as a model social organism, the underworld symbolism in Plath's Bee poems is highly charged, and ripe with paradox and contradiction. Here, for instance, we find the suicidal sting of the female bee, a bee-box metaphor for dark unconscious forces, and a Persephone-like marriage to a subterranean father-god. We also find Napoleon, whose imperial motif was the bee, and the ancient many-breasted Bee-Goddess, an unlikely pairing whose polarity encompasses the sexual politics of the underworld. (The Beekeeper's Daughter, The Arrival of the Bee Box, The Swarm.) Britzolakis reads Plath's encounter with the 'oracle', and bee-keeper, as a metaphorical exploration of power relationships, a struggle for voice and poetic authority so burdened by personal history that it can't be reduced to teleology. Other critics stress the Freudian view that apparently fated events, and daemonic possession, stem from infantile sexual desire, and claim that Plath ultimately took that view. Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney, on the other hand, regard Plath's Ariel voice as genuinely oracular, unbidden and irresistible.

Either of these views might appear to undermine feminist reassertions of agency, but both the poetic material, and associated Sun-Pluto synastry, remain highly evocative.

A Solar eclipse (on 1st October 1940) preceding Otto Plath's death, 11 minutes of arc from Sylvia Plath's natal Moon, establishes another connection between that seismic event and her poetry. During the period when she was seeing Ruth Beuscher privately, she paid her first visit to his grave. This was on the 8th March 1959, with transiting Saturn and Pluto both sextile, and their midpoint four minutes of arc from, natal Sun. More remarkably, her progressed Sun, amplified by a transiting Jupiter-Pluto square, closely opposed Otto Plath's Pluto, the point activated by a full Moon six years previously, when she so nearly joined him in the underworld. Where the scene appears in The Bell Jar, Esther Greenwood realises this was the first time she had cried for her father's death. On the day Sylvia Plath met Ted Hughes (the 25th
February 1956), a strikingly Saturnine story unfolded behind the familiar drama of the snatched ear-rings and bitten cheek. That morning she kept a routine appointment with a University psychiatrist, who turned out to be a sympathetic older man. While talking to him, she realised that she craved the companionship of older friends she could look up to, and found herself wanting to cry and be comforted by a father figure. Transiting Neptune was closely trine, with Saturn square, and Pluto opposite natal Ascendant.

From her letters and journals, it's clear that there was a lot of love and joy in Sylvia Plath's married life with Ted Hughes, not least surrounding the birth of her daughter, with progressed Moon just two minutes of arc from its return, and her son, with progressed Moon conjunct natal Sun. Yet even when outer circumstances seemed enviable, when they moved into a thatched house in Devon with its own orchard, and both were enjoying professional success and an egalitarian working and childcare routine, her poems retained an air of existential fragility and menace. (Blackberrying, Surgeon at 2 am, Last Words, The Moon and the Yew Tree.) When the marriage unravelled, Plath's Elektra theme resurfaced with unbridled fury. She wrote Daddy on the day Hughes finally left Court Green, which happened to be an anniversary of her father's fateful leg operation. During the prolific month of October 1962, when most of the key Ariel poems were written, in the early hours, before the children woke, transiting Saturn stationed on 4 Aquarius, repeating its natal square to Plath's eighth-house Scorpio Sun (with progressed Sun semisextile, Jupiter trine, and Uranus sextile that point, and transiting Pluto applying square natal Midheaven). The title poem for this incandescent collection (Ariel means 'God's Lioness' in Hebrew, as well as being the name of a horse she rode on Dartmoor), was written on her thirtieth birthday (27th October 1962), a date better known as 'Black Saturday' at the height of the Cuban missile crisis. A dark Moon was approaching its renewal, on the following day, conjunct natal Sun. The poem's speaker becomes an arrow, flying suicidally into the Apollonian red eye of the dawn.

In Plath's later poems, a masculine Solar principle increasingly signifies despotic power. The stressful emphasis on her Sun and Midheaven axis during this period suggests that the Solar gifts of vitality, meaning, purpose, joy, and illuminating vision, and her ability to express these in the world, would be under considerable pressure. Given that oracular practice is said to require a synthesis of the powers of darkness and light, it's interesting to find Seamus Heaney criticising Plath's lack of conscious control over the oracle. A cluster of other suicides of Scorpio poets, including Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, Plath's teacher and friend on a poetry course she attended in Boston, suggests a particular susceptibility associated with this Sun placement. But does Sylvia Plath's horoscope indicate a fundamental pattern of tragedy? Since her poetry arguably contributed to the grain of pervasive cultural oppression. Although Plath's cultural legacy remains "a key reference point for the depressive internalisation of political anger", she successfully asserted her poetic voice, and achieved recognition against the grain of pervasive cultural oppression. The story of her life serves as a stark reminder of the value of democratic and dialogical approaches to distress and madness, while the oracular dimension of her poetry lifts it beyond the reach of arbitrary knowledge, and casts some fine light upon worlds we struggle to measure and evoke astrologically.

Birth data: endnote
Rodden gives a birth time of 2:10 p.m. (29°21' Aquarius AS), source: the mother, from memory. In an October 1956 letter to his astrologer sister Olwyn (LTH p78) Ted Hughes gives 29 Aquarius rising, but in a subsequent letter (23rd Feb 1957) says that on that day the Sun was on Sylvia's Ascendant degree, probably referring to 4 Pisces (LTH p94). In Birthday Letters he refers to a Pisces Ascendant, but note that astrological references in these poems include deliberate mistakes. An early letter refers to a late Aries Ascendant. The Bell Jar was written between 18th March and 22nd August 1961.

Otto Plath was born on 13th April 1885 in one of the towns called Grabow (Grabowo) in the Polish Corridor. (Linda Wagner Martin, Ibid, p17).


Author note
A copy of 'The Hanging Man' adorned the office of the service-user-led voluntary organisation Brian worked for. His writing on masculinities and risk, based on a social science PhD, is currently being used in the postgraduate teaching of mental health professionals. He remembers a helpful conversation with Fiona Griffiths, who told him (in 1982) that it takes 25 years to become an astrologer, but still feels ambivalent about natal astrology, and periodically needs to rethink its limitations and possibilities.

Endnotes
All charts use Placidus and True Node unless stated.
2. Note also a Sun-Saturn conjunction with its midpoint 3 minutes of arc from natal Moon.

25
12 Steven Gould Axelrod (1990), ibid, p26.
37 The *Bell Jar*, which revisits these experiences, was written during Plath's Saturn return.
41 Astrolabe, Solar Fire.

Brian Taylor has had a close relationship with the landscape and wild creatures of the poet's native Calder Valley, including a bird-illuminated passage through bereavement and its protracted aftermath. He worked in the "mental health" field and his applied social science PhD included sociobiographical studies of four men who were also regarded as shamanic figures. He has been fascinated by astrology for over 25 years, and has written many articles for U.K. publications. This article was prompted by a friend's involvement in an Elmet Trust literary festival marking the tenth anniversary of Ted Hughes' death.