Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, part 3 – the composite chart

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Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath were talented young poets when they met in February 1956. Their all-consuming, turbulent, but often joyful marriage, produced two children, and thanks initially to Plath’s ambition and professionalism, doubled as an intense and successful working partnership. Hughes also became deeply entangled in Plath’s struggle to survive and recover from her relationship with an autocratic father who died when she was eight, and from traumatic electroshock treatment that probably precipitated a very serious suicide attempt two and a half years before they met. Given the forces at play, it’s perhaps not surprising that they separated after six years. Plath took her own life four months later, and was soon cast as a martyr. Hughes was blamed for her death, and when his subsequent partner Assia Wevill also committed suicide, radical feminists waged a sustained campaign of vilification. His eventual reply came in the form of Birthday Letters, a highly regarded collection of poems addressed primarily to his long-departed first wife.

With the passage of time a more nuanced picture has emerged of a complex and heart-rending story. Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath present a particular challenge to astrologers because of their contested history, the sheer volume of life writing, the sensitivity of the biographical material, and the risk of using astrology to fix an overly negative reading of either poet, or of the marriage. My purpose here is to show that their striking composite chart constitutes a powerful and distinctive image of the force field generated by this relationship. Interestingly, it appears responsive to events occurring after both have died, and also perhaps to events that occurred before they met.

For example, Last Letter, a previously unpublished poem from Ted Hughes’ Birthday Letters sequence, appeared in the New Statesman last October. It deals with the night on which Sylvia Plath took her own life, the letter in question being a suicide note that reached Hughes too soon, and which, in a gesture of apparent reassurance, she burned in front of him. As the poem was being performed on Channel Four News, a void-of-course dark Moon, echoing the unsuspected dark Moon in Plath’s horoscope, was separating by twenty minutes of arc from composite Sun. Transiting Mercury was partile conjunct composite South Node, with transiting Saturn in attendance.

Composite Sun-Venus sextile Moon confirms that this really was a love story. Robert McCrum describes the tale of Ted and Sylvia as “a lyrical volcano... one of the great love stories of the 20th century”, but also refers to the radioactive power of their poetic legacy. The drama and intensity that characterised their lives, their writing, and their cultural impact, are unambiguously depicted by a cardinal grand cross involving Mars-Pluto (also conjunct Moon) in the 4th (passion and conflict, Plath’s penchant for risk and aggression, Hughes as hunter and ‘murderer’, and for instance the renovation of a rectory overlooking a graveyard, the arson attack on his Yorkshire home, and the desecration of her grave), Uranus in the 12th (contacting spirits, ‘first flash vision’, unconsciously disruptive action, Plath’s ‘lightning’ E.C.T, Hughes and the science of water pollution), Saturn in the 9th conjunct MC (hard intellectual work, public achievement, Plath’s Daddy, Hughes as scapegoat, then Laureate), and Mercury in the 6th (dedication to routine mental work, poetic exercises).

There can be little doubt that this is the engine room of the composite, but Neptune, semi-square and at the midpoint of Mars-Pluto and Mercury, is arguably pivotal, continuing the Neptunian theme from each natal chart’s seventh house. The importance of Neptune was doubly announced on the night Plath and Hughes met, by a full Moon ten minutes of arc from composite Neptune (26th February 1956), and transiting Neptune seventeen minutes of arc from composite seventh house cusp. Neptune in the seventh is associated with a vision of perfect union and redemption, but also with overwhelming idealisation and deception. Neptune in the fifth, its composite placement, describes a creativity that yearns for union with the Source, characteristically entails suffering, and has been linked with the Romantic poets.

The Neptune-Mercury-Mars-Pluto figure is a striking signature for cathartic poetic work, the ‘poetry in extremis’ they were said to exemplify, for engagement with near-death experience and the spirit world, for Plath as Medusa, for her drowned sea god and oracular voice, for Hughes’ dreaming of cannibalistic Pike the night before their wedding, for his preoccupation with fishing and shamanism. Ebertin, with his pessimistic take on Neptune, gives “over-receptiveness, nervous sensitiveness... falsehood, calumny and libel... slander and defamation... irreconcilability or implacability, cunning and deceitfulness... a catastrophe caused by water”. All of which evokes the feel of things once the Hughes’s Edenic Devonian idyll began to disintegrate.

If disillusionment, involving potentially global rage, is integral to Neptune’s process, we should expect to find it manifesting during Pluto’s transit of composite Neptune. In the autumn of 1959 when Ted and Sylvia were staying at Yaddo artists’ colony, New York State, they would hypnotise each other. Hughes incorporated magical and divinatory procedures into his writing practice, and worked on an oratorio based on the Bardo Thodol. Plath wrote the “mad
Poem for a Birthday: On the 9th of December 1959, as Pluto stationed 6 minutes of arc from composite Neptune (with Neptune sextile and Saturn trine), they took a sea voyage back to England. Here they enjoyed professional success and were accepted into London literary circles. Their first child was born. Plath was preoccupied with home-making, but broke new ground as a woman poet. During this period she also experienced a miscarriage and an appendectomy. There were stormy scenes. In a fit of groundless jealousy she tore up Hughes' work in progress, destroying his treasured Shakespeare. On 18th March 1961, three days from an exact transit, Plath began writing The Bell Jar. She became pregnant again, and in August 1961 they moved to Devon. The process of disintegration occurred as Pluto pulled away from composite Neptune.10

Birthday Letters was published on 29th January 1998, a date elected by Hughes to coincide with Neptune's ingress into Aquarius, but Neptune was also square its position on the composite 7th cusp when he and Plath met. Nine months later he died from heart failure, a day after what would have been her 66th birthday. Transiting Saturn was now on, and Neptune still square, the composite 1st cusp.

At the time of Plath's suicide attempt in a cellar on the full Moon of 24th August 1953, transiting Neptune (with Saturn) was conjunct composite Mercury, was four minutes of arc from square composite Pluto, and was also semi-square composite Neptune. Perhaps she was calling Hughes towards her in some way? In any case, the aftermath of that crisis arguably shaped the relationship, and much that followed. The composite chart seems to suggest this much more immediately and vigorously than the two separate natal charts.

Data Note:
Ted Hughes, 17th August 1930, Mytholmroyd, 1.12, U.K.
Sylvia Plath, 27th October 1932, Boston, 14:10 U.S.A.
Source: Rodden, mother from memory.
See previous articles for other possible birth times. Despite Hughes' chart being ranked 'B' and Plath's 'A!', I came to feel more confident about the former, but composites derived from other plausible versions generate angles that fall within three degrees of the chart used here.

Endnotes

Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath - Composite midpoints, Placidus houses, mean node.

2 Channel 4 News, London, 19:27 BST on 6th October 2010. Transiting Uranus was opposite composite Sun. Note also that transiting Mercury was 6 minutes of arc from square Hughes' seventh-house Saturn.
3 Robert McCrum, "Hughes' final lines to Plath bring closure to a tragic tale", The Observer, 10 October 2010, p.34.
4 Ekbert Faas (1980), The Unaccommodated Universe, Santa Barbara, Black Sparrow Press, p.40. Alertness to the 1,000-volt shock that illuminates everything turns poetry into "a resonance or vibration of the vitalising spirit and movement of life" (ch'i-yun sheng-tung).
5 Hughes has NE-120-SA on the 7th cusp, Plath has NE-SN-JU in the 7th, all square MC - she initially deified and later demonised him.
10 Pluto then transited Plath's Neptune through the traumatic period of separation when she wrote the Ariel poems. Whether it transits also hint at such a possibility. The full Moon opposed his Neptune, Mercury and Mars squared his 12th-house MO-CH, and Neptune squared his Pluto.

Brian Taylor has lived most of his adult life in the Calder Valley, West Yorkshire, has a close interest in its landscape and wild creatures, and is at present writing an account of bird, animal, insect, and related mysteries. Despite occasional pangs of ambivalence about the uses, rather than truths, of astrology, he's been a contributor to astrological publications since the late eighties, and after a long hiatus has recently read someone's horoscope. Whatever next? Recent influences include Ted Hughes and Michel Foucault. He would welcome reports of significant bird encounters, via: brian.taylor@carefree.net