Hughes and Sylvia Plath: an astrological reading

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Part One: visions of dismemberment – the shamanic voice of Ted Hughes

"As Hughes put it, in a metaphor, it was the solar system that had married them the night they met, and in many of the works that flowed from that heavenly creative partnership, they are indissoluble."
Dianne Middlebrook, The Poetry of Plath and Hughes, Call and Response.

"The only religion the hero's deepest humanity sanctions for him is communion with a world whose gods are perpetually crucified and eaten and resurrected... His task, like Blake's Milton, is "to redeem the female shade" which is his own emanation, his anima, mother, bride and vision."
Keith Sagar, The Laughter of Foxes.

Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath wrote some of the most intense poetry in the English language. That they did so during a six-year marriage which doubled as an unusually intimate collaboration between two major artists, and managed to live from their creative writing while bringing up two young children, was remarkable. Given the nature of their work and the personal, family, and cultural histories at play, it should perhaps not surprise us that this arrangement proved unstable. John Etherington, who wrote an astrological account shortly after Hughes' death, described their love story as one of the most poignant of the twentieth century. Other relationships were undoubtedly important to Hughes, particularly a turbulent seven-year partnership with Assia Wevill, and a twenty-eight-year marriage to Carol Hughes. However, because of the stature of Plath and Hughes as first rank English language poets, and because their personal relationship was pivotal to their public lives as writers, it is this partnership that has inevitably preoccupied biographers and critics.

As many readers will know, Hughes' life was marked by a sequence of appalling tragedies, and thereafter by intractable conflict. Extraordinarily, both Sylvia Plath and Assia Wevill committed suicide, Wevill taking a child with her. The timing of Plath's death, just as she was securing recognition, against considerable odds, is critical to the way in which their stories subsequently unfolded. The Ariel poems, for which she is best known, emerged from the anguish of separation, freezing her voice at a moment memorable for its rage. Although Plath had made a very serious bid to end her life two and a half years before meeting Hughes, some radical feminists suspected that he had been abusive, and blamed him for her death. To make matters worse, from the perspective of many more feminist critics, Plath died intestate, leaving the deserting husband in charge of her estate – editing, censoring, and profiting from her work. From Hughes' point of view, as evidenced in some heart-rending letters and poems, notably in Birthday Letters, a late collection addressed primarily to the long departed Plath, it's not difficult to imagine why he would have wanted to hold on to his late wife's body of work, to continue working with her in spirit, and to administer her affairs in the interests of their children. Several of Hughes' friends describe difficult encounters with a controlling and emotionally dramatic Plath, and even express surprise that he remained loyal for so long. In the years following her death, this charismatic couple were constructed as quasi-mythical figures, and many people still identify strongly with one or other of them, usually according to the reader's gender. Fortunately, since Birthday Letters, a re-evaluation of Ted Hughes and his work has gathered momentum and a less partisan conversation is emerging. A recently published volume of correspondence reveals a man of considerable sensitivity, lovingly engaged with the lives of his children, his extended family, and many friends, and should further dispel the caricature of Hughes as a chauvinistic Heathcliffe promulgated by some Plath biographers.

A key issue for anyone approaching the astrology of Hughes and Plath is that in addition to their own life-writing (their work, journals, letters, and interviews), there is such a wealth of biographical material (biographies, meta-biographies, memoirs, and photographs) as well as literary criticism, surrounding them, that our sense of their flesh and blood lives becomes by turns either peculiarly vivid or confused and surreal. The repetition of sometimes intimate detail, written from contradictory perspectives of varying provenance, makes cautious navigation essential. We are faced, in short, with a paradigmatic example of contested biography, and the difficulty of disentangling public from private lives, not least since fictional voices seldom transparently represent a writer's innermost selves. Care is also required in relation to our emotional investment as
readers. Furthermore, some of Plath's papers remain in a sealed archive, and we can't be sure of her birth time.

From a broadly postmodern perspective, these difficulties appear most pronounced in relation to modernist approaches to biography and psychology that seek to distill the essence of a coherent unitary self, while often overestimating the rationality of both subject and commentator, or in relation to a modernistic impulse to import such assumptions into astrology. A literary critic, for instance, seeks to use psychoanalytic concepts to generate "as clear an x-ray as possible", not just of Hughes' language, but also of "its implications for the self and its grasp of reality." With this unambiguous declaration of power-knowledge, the writer has clearly entered Foucauldian territory, as would any astrologer who deploys this familiar metaphor for the mapping of souls. There is a world of difference between looking for patterns, signs, images, and stories among an energetic field inhabited by the poet, and claiming to fillet his psyche. Postmodern approaches that treat the horoscope as a hermeneutic matrix, and astrology as a dialogue involving mystery and uncertainty rather than an empirical exercise, also arguably render the lack of certainty about birth times less problematic. Having outlined some challenges, I now want to present an exploratory reading of some key horoscope symbols that unfold around the life and work of Ted Hughes. Sylvia Plath and the composite chart are discussed in Part Two.

Ted Hughes

John Etherington opened his review of a rectified version of Hughes' birth chart and the synastry with Plath by drawing attention to the unusual strength of his planetary placements. The Sun, Mercury, Venus and Saturn are all in the signs they rule, while the Moon, Mercury and Jupiter are exalted. This clearly suggests an abundance of vitality and natural aptitude. No wonder Hughes was drawn to astrology. I was aware of the references in Birthday Letters but hadn't realised the extent of Hughes' interest. Sylvia Plath, for instance, describes a tall young man who would turn up with the pockets of his black corduroy jacket crammed with poems, fresh trout, and horoscopes. In 1957 he attempted to place a small ad offering chart readings, but had this rejected because of fears about the Witchcraft Act.

Ann Skea provides an intriguing account of his use of alchemy and cabbalah in some of the major poetic sequences. I was particularly interested in the shamanic intention of much of Hughes' work, but was never surprised when my recent decision to look at the astrology behind his life and work was immediately followed by a powerful animal dream, locating my own experience of the harrowing yet numinous complexity of difficult bereavement as an interpretive key. This left me with a vivid sense that Hughes' prolonged and almost unimaginable multiple bereavement would have had a profound effect on his subsequent relationships, on his dealings with the world, and of course on his writing, and wondering whether this had been adequately accounted for.

The following reading emphasises the pervasive influence of Neptune — on Ted Hughes' Sun (in Leo widely conjunct Neptune), on his twelfth-house Moon (conjunct Chiron and trine Mercury, Neptune being with Moon/Mercury midpoint), and on his Ascendant-Descendant axis, seventh-

house Saturn, twelfth-house Mars, and first house Jupiter (all aspected by Neptune). Hughes' writing is suffused by a profound spirituality grounded in nature, and a belief in the healing power of mythology and poetry. The chart used here is one based on a letter discovered by Dianne Middlebrook, in which Hughes claims to have been born at exactly "solar midnight". My feeling is that the symbolic eloquence of this horoscope as a Solar chart, albeit an unconventional one, overcomes any lingering uncertainty about the birth time (see endnote).

**Solar midnight, Sun and Neptune**

The attributes of resplendent Leo (along with empathetic Moon-Chiron and Neptune) are plain enough to see in Hughes' life, not least in the many testimonies to his generosity. Deborah Ayer of Emory University, for instance, approached the archive "convinced he was a villain", only to find that what came across over and over was "how generous and caring he was". Hughes regarded the Sun's position at the nadir of his horoscope as an indication of his contradictory need for both public recognition and privacy, but would also have been well aware of its mythological implications. The phrase "Solar midnight" evokes the night sea journey of the Sun, and seems particularly apt if we allow a natal conjunction between Sun and Neptune. I'm tempted to relax my scepticism about wide orbs here, partly because imposing rigid orbs around Neptune feels a bit like trying to catch water in a net, but mainly because of some quite impressive mythological corroborations, and because Hughes' Sun-Neptune midpoint coincides with the pivotal Sun-Moon midpoint of the composite chart with Plath.

This graphic picture of the relationship as a source of inspiration to Hughes arguably focuses an otherwise nebulous link. The notion of Solar midnight also opens up the mythical terrain of Solar Heroes, who descend into the realm of death, do battle with various dragons, and emerge victorious. "Like the heavenly Sun arising from the depths of darkness, these divine sons were born at midnight hidden..."
in the depths of the earth." In Greece the luminous child was called Dionysos, Helios, and Orpheus. Clearly the single graphic image of Sun on the fourth cusp opens up a wealth of narrative material.

Hughes was heavily influenced by Jung, and their birth charts share some key features, including Sun in Leo associated with a prominent Neptune, and Moon in Taurus aspecting Pluto. I have therefore turned to Jungian astrologers for guidance in unpacking the mythology. Apollo, carrier of divine fire, god of poetry, and python slayer who seized the oracle at Delphi and shared it with Dionysos, is clearly relevant, not least since Hughes associated the dying and reborn god with his theory of the poetic self. So too is the potentially productive tension between two apparently incompatible discourses about dragon slaying. While feminist readings have identified hero myths since the late Bronze Age Enuma Elish (in which Marduk slew the Mother Goddess Tiamat) in terms of the cultural history of patriarchal takeover, Jungian readings interpret their imagery of light conquering darkness as a metaphor for individuation.14 At this point we should recall that Ted Hughes was a significant critical mythographer who continually reworked the hero myths, for example by reversing the story of St George, and by valorising the vulture rather than Prometheus.15 The symbolic tension between the vital radiance of the Sun, signifying the purposeful heroic "individuating" self, and sensitive, otherworldly, imaginative Neptune, signifying the surrender of selfhood in the collective interest, or mystical unity, is a prominent subtext.20

Liz Greene's discussion of the "solar necessity to separate from the family matrix" casts interesting light, for instance, upon Ted Hughes’ and Sylvia Plath's strangely secret wedding, which he informed his parents about only subsequently, under pressure from his wife. Apollo’s ability to transform grief through creativity is evident in both the intensity and scope, associated with indi-viduation. "active imagination" and "the cultivation of ... inner life-experience", but also with being easily influenced by others. Hughes remembered this period, during which he was sent to retrieve innumerable corpses of small creatures, as formative and paradisal. More specifically, given that Ted Hughes' angular Sun applies towards a conjunction with Neptune, we might expect his progressed Sun to signify important early developments of a Neptunian kind. Hughes' father had been awarded a medal for bravery in the First World War but had been very lucky to survive, and had recurrent nightmares about what he had witnessed (natal Sun sextile Mars, and square Chiron). In various poems he is depicted as silent and sedentary (Sun-Neptune in the 4th). Fortunately, Ted's older brother Gerald took him into the surrounding countryside and introduced him to a vivid fantasy life of hunting and fishing. At around the age of four to five, when these excursions began in earnest, progressed Sun approached natal Sun/Neptune, a midpoint of critical importance in Hughes' horoscope, associated with the assertion of individuality, "active imagination" and "the cultivation of ... inner life-experience", but also with being easily influenced by others. Hughes, who also has Saturn in the seventh, is described by detractors as a philanderer. Blake Morrison refers, more sympathetically, to "the complications of Hughes' heart."23

And of course, Parsifal encounters a lame and aged Fisher King whose wound is associated with the ruin of the land. Joseph Campbell's commentaries on the Grail King and Orpheus the mystic fisherman (Sun-Neptune) would have been familiar to Hughes, for whom fishing was a mode of spiritual engagement with the origins of life.24 Orpheus, a son of Apollo, could attract wild creatures with his music. Hughes seems to have shared this gift. An owl almost landed on his face, and salmon would appear on cue. Apollo wore the skin of a panther, or turned into a lion. Both creatures inhabit Hughes' poetic dialogue with Plath. Orpheus was even able to charm the infernal deities into releasing Eurydice. After Plath's death their story arguably became the mythical backdrop to all of Hughes' poetry.25 Longing for a lost ideal love is said to be a characteristically Neptunian preoccupation. Furthermore, as redeemer-victims, Dionysos and Orpheus were both torn apart by women. Orpheus had driven the women of Thrace wild by his single-minded devotion to his wife, while Dionysos awakened a longing for complete ecstatic fusion. An encounter with the life force embodied in this androgynous god transformed the maenads from housewives and mothers into women who appropriate male powers and defeat men.

Greene identifies an archaic and infantile desire to dismember and devour those who seem to carry the spark of godhead as a disturbing aspect of Neptunian longing.26 Radical feminist rage against Hughes was galvanised around a poem that invoked this mythology by imagining the poet's dismemberment. The destruction and rebirth of Orphic Dionysos symbolised everlasting life. A consistent thread in earlier Dionysian mythology is that whenever his worship was suppressed the local population would succumb to madness, sometimes so severe that fathers or mothers were driven to kill their own children.27 Neptune is associated with sacrifice and self-sacrifice, and the sometimes uncomfortably close resonance of these stories confirms a strong association between Sun and Neptune here.

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The progressed Sun's first contact with a natal planet is regarded as highly significant developmentally, and progressed Sun's arrival at natal Neptune at the age of eight to nine did indeed mark a major turning point. The family moved to Mexborough, and Gerald, described as both surrogate father figure and twin, left home. Mars in Gemini (the twins) in the 4th (sextile Sun, ruler of the 3rd house of siblings, as well as the 4th) was being squared by transiting Sun and Neptune on natal Mercury. With Mars and Mercury also on natal Neptune, this augured well for the adolescent discovery of his gift. Ted continued to conduct a secret outdoor life and acquired an obsession with pike that would inform one of his signature poems.

At the age of eighteen, when progressed Sun reached natal Mercury/Neptune (signific point of the imaginative faculty), he won a scholarship to Cambridge with the help of a favourite English teacher, the appropriately named John Fisher, who gave him a copy of The White Goddess by Robert Graves. At about this time, Gerald emigrated from Australia. Ted's twin brother, and Geredal, described as both orphaned and orphaned, poured his grief into poetry. Although I don't have exact dates for the midpoint contacts, Neptune is clearly associated with early experiences of idealisation and separation, and with escape from domesticity and loss into communion with nature, creative imagination, and then poetry.

Liz Greene's observations on Neptune in the fourth house, that the planet's "elusive, inaccessible qualities... seem to mirror back to the individual the lost magic of the Paradise Garden", and that there is often great sadness because the father was uncommunicative, are apposite. There may be a compensatory need to appear strong, and consequent depression despite worldly achievements. Hughes is described as having an authoritative air, and as someone other people relied upon. Neptune in the fourth can signify the search for a lost spiritual home in surrogate form, or perfect family environment. He became immersed in complicated extended family living arrangements, and tried to interest several partners in setting up home near his parents' house in Yorkshire, in one case with both Sylvia Plath and her mother buried nearby. His mother's family lineage included the very Neptunian figure of a martyred sixteenth century bishop, and a founder of the religious community of Little Gidding. Hughes believed that occult powers could run in families. Neptune in the fourth also shows his Blakean mythologising of the culture and landscape of the Calder Valley, his belief in the primacy of a Gravesian Creatrix, and his shamanic sense of negotiation with a turbulent and ever present spirit world. At the no less valid practical level, it accords well with his ecological campaigning on issues relating to water pollution.

Moon-Chiron in the 12th: feeling the wounds of the collective

The Solar midnight horoscope, with its Cancer Ascendant, also speaks eloquently through the symbolism of Ted Hughes' natal Moon, in the twelfth house conjunct a yet-to-be-discovered Chiron. This tense union between the signifiers of early emotional development and embodiment, and of bodily wounding, alerts us to the possibility of a problematic early relationship with his mother, and that there may have been a deep sense of unmet need. Astrological convention also suggests that he would "attract" wounded women, but a formulaic statement of this kind, simply reversing the claim that he was a destroyer of women, hardly seems adequate here. Between these positions, a more nuanced reading would negotiate the complexities of social construction and human agency. Reflecting with hindsight on why he'd enjoyed working with female inmates of the Burgholzli, Jung commented that his anima, or feminine nature, could then only exist in the form of a "diseased" woman. We don't have to accept Jung's medicalisation language, or his conceptualisation of gender, to see that relationships may reflect something quite specific about our state of inner development. After all, this Moon-Chiron conjunction is in Ted Hughes' horoscope, not that of Sylvia Plath, Assia Wevill, or Edith Hughes.

In a late poem entitled Source, Hughes recalls early childhood memories of his mother's recurrent weeping. The contrast between her continued mourning and the father's perceived silence reflects a strongly gendered division of emotional labour in the aftermath of the Great War. Melanie Reinhart associates Chiron in the twelfth with "the feeling life of the collective", and with deep grieving that often involves "crying for no apparent reason". I'm struck by the image of a young Ted escaping from this on to the moors (Jupiter Poeninus, god of high places, after whom the Pennines were named, opposed natal Moon during his fifth year), and eagerly handling all those freshly killed animals. Memories from this period would surely inform his much debated preoccupation with violence (p. ASC crossed natal SO/MO and MA/PL and opposed natal Saturn). The psychically gifted Edith Hughes described visitations by her deceased sister in angelic form when someone in the family was about to die. With Chiron in the twelfth, the world of the imagination may feel completely real, especially during childhood, while in later life there may be a need to abandon the self to ecstatic experience. In many ways, Ted Hughes' childhood supported his emerging creativity, and he acknowledged the pivotal role that women played in his development as a poet. His sister Olwyn was a mentor during adolescence and became his literary agent, while Sylvia Plath secured recognition for his early work. But his mother's dialect voice and story telling, which gave him access to a wealth of local lore, was fundamental to the formation of his own distinctive voice (Mercury trine Moon, mediated by Pluto, and Neptune by midpoint).

Men with Moon-Chiron "remain painfully aware of the feeling life of their mothers", often play a mothering role, and "may attract wounded women". Hughes did indeed take a close interest in his mother's ailments and changing physical condition, reporting his observations in correspondence with his elder brother. When her health deteriorated following Sylvia Plath's suicide, he moved her into the family home and looked after her. Hughes is also described as mothering Plath. According to Reinhart such men instinctively know how to meet other people's needs, and may have a "profound relationship with the inner life of images." They will "probably attract people who need comfort, compassion,
and support, and make unceasing demands", leaving them "feeling drained and overwhelmed". This seems to fit, but
with Chiron in the twelfth we may also be "adept at stirring up emotional chaos, making tempers rise around us and
retaining a sense of vague innocence throughout". Reinhardt also comments that illness and even suicide threats may be
used when loved ones become too separate.36

Relating to others
There's something radically unsettling about encountering woundedness in a mother, so we might expect to find a sharp
ambivalence in Hughes' attitude towards women. Moon in Taurus in the 12th sextile Pluto in Cancer also signifies the
succession of cunning hags and ogresses who confront his protagonists: versions of the hideous guiding goddess who
traditionally becomes the Sun god's bride.37 38 Moon-Chiron falls square to Hughes' natal Sun, and his Sun/Moon midpoint,a
point regarded by Charles Harvey as equivalent to a personal planet, a symbol astrologers omit at their peril, is with another
key significator highlighted by the Solar midnight chart, seventh-house Saturn on the Descendant.39 In other words,
the key to resolving an inner marriage between body and soul, heart and head, strained by an early sense of parental tension,
lies even more emphatically than usual in the challenges of relationship. Furthermore, Neptune trines both Saturn and
the Descendant. Positively, this symbolises the combination of self-discipline, hard work, and inspiration that characterised
Hughes' many close collaborations with other artists. But Neptune is also associated with confusion, deception or self-
deception, charisma and intoxication, and with a Dionysian tendency to render Saturn's boundaries porous. In Hughes,
this tendency would emerge in close relationships, and seems to have been linked to the pain of depression and loss
(Chiron trine Saturn in the 7th). He is described as unusually attractive to women, but passive in encounters with them
(Neptune). It was they who pursued him.40

It so happens that Chiron was the son of Cronos (Saturn)
and the nymph Philyla, daughter of Oceanus and Tethys
(Neptune), both of whom turned into horses during the
pursuit that led to procreation. As well as symbolising our
animal nature, horses are involved with shamanic flight, and
carry souls between worlds. When Chiron was born, Philyra
was so disgusted by his horse's body that she pleaded to be
changed into a tree. Apollo found the abandoned infant,
and became his foster father.41 We should not be surprised
to find Ted Hughes' progressed Sun trine natal Moon (orb
21 minutes) and Chiron (50 minutes), as well as conjunct
Mercury (one degree), when he first met Sylvia Plath (at a
Cambridge party on 25 February 1956), thereby confirming
her participation in his Moon-Chiron symbolism. Both were
quite drunk at the time (Neptune). He snatched her hair-
band and earrings, and she bit his cheek, leaving a ring of
scars (Chiron). Pluto was transiting Hughes' Sun/Neptune
midpoint, signifier of boyhood escape from domesticity
into a fantasy life of hunting, and associated with both
transitional objects and the figure of the muse42, and Sun/
Moon midpoint in the composite chart. Ariel, incidentally,
was the name of Sylvia Plath's horse.

Hughes' seventh-house Saturn in its own sign, doubly
emphasised through being both angular and with Sun/Moon
midpoint, is reflected in the stability of his upbringing and
the conventional attitudes of his parents (SA=SO/MO), his
rejection of their puritanical Methodism (trine Neptune),
his assertion of working-class origins and affection of
a scruffy persona as young man (square Venus, opposite
ASC), in the boundary demarcating this from Plath's
conscientious cleanliness, and later between wife and muse;
in his formidable work ethic – a trait shared by Plath (who
was a lot more Saturnine than the stereotype of a crazy
poet might suggest), his fundamental seriousness, and a
depressive self-critical tendency (SA=SO/MO). Saturn
also shows in his growing sense of imprisonment by Plath.
Mythologically, Kronos on the Descendant is none other
than Apollo "Lord of Life and Light" in the land of the
Hyperboreans, the captive god, a withered winter Sun
setting in the west, unable to support life.43 Hughes' Saturn
therefore also works as a second signifier for the tragic
process at the heart of his life (SA=SO/MO), depicting the
coldness and stillness of the corpses of two lovers, the
freezing and disruption of time by Plath's suicide, the strong
sense of being damned by his mistakes, and with Chiron
in the 12th, the way in which he was cast as a scapegoat.
In later life, of course, Hughes accepted the Laureateship
and became something of an establishment figure.

Hamartia – a tragic decision
However we view Hughes' actions in embarking upon
the relationship with Assia Wevill, Aristotle's concept of
hamartia – a mistake, flaw, or decision entailing the downfall
of a tragic hero – comes close to describing its biographical
significance. Whatever pressures pushed and pulled him,
that extended moment clearly brought an ominous change
of fortune and dislodged a slow-motion avalanche of
contingency. Assia and David Wevill visited the Hughes'
Devon home around the full Moon of 19 May 1962 which
fell on 28 Scorpio 8, just 20 minutes of arc from square to
Hughes and Plath's composite Sun/Moon midpoint, and one
minute of arc from an exact square to Hughes' Sun/Neptune.

Interestingly, Middlebrook interprets Hughes' affairs
as an adult version of the double life of his boyhood and
adolescence.44 His progressed Sun, one minute of arc from
the 5th cusp of playful creativity, was leaving the house of
domesticity, separating from semisquare natal Sun, and
applying towards a square to natal Mars in Gemini in the
12th. Pulled in two directions, did Parsifal become a false
knight? The relationship with Assia began shortly before
a Lunar appulse eclipse (on 17 July 1962) at 24 Capricorn
32, configured with a Pluto-Chiron opposition. Pluto was
conjunct the eclipse chart's ruling planet Venus (in fall in
Virgo), which was applying towards square Mars (ruler of
the descendant) in Gemini in the 8th. Uranus, planet of liberation
– and divorce – was now at 28 Leo 38, on both aforementioned
midpoints. The eclipse fell on Hughes' progressed Descendant
(orb 10 minutes of arc), trine progressed Sun, quincunx natal
Sun, and square his nodal axis (of "fated" relationships).
Progressed Sun/Moon midpoint (at 22 Leo 35) was conjunct
natal Sun, and progressed Moon conjunct natal Pluto. There
was clearly a lot of momentum here. A decision had to be
made, which would fundamentally affect the direction of
his life, and his marriage. But does the eclipse indicate an
exceptionally bleak outcome, or was it a latent sign awaiting
discovery and interpretation?45

Assia Wevill's horoscope (b. 15 May 1927, Berlin) includes
Sun square Neptune, a configuration linked to the risk of
suicide, with Neptune (idealising fantasy) on Hughes' Sun,
and a Venus-Uranus square (electric attractiveness) aligned
with his axis of relationship.46 In Hughes' natal chart Venus
is entangled in two t-squares, one involving an opposition
to Uranus, with Jupiter (Zeus, god of promiscuity) at their
midpoint. Venus-Uranus contacts signify a need for space,
freedom, and spontaneity, and are a characteristic indicator of affairs, and unorthodox or open relationships. Hughes' relationship with Assia was tempestuous, not least because she was ostracised and blamed for Sylvia's death while he was caring for his mother and struggling with depression. Assia, whose Jewish family had escaped from Germany in 1939, had been restless in three previous marriages, but wanted to settle with Ted. She apparently made numerous suicide threats before killing both herself and her four-year-old daughter.

In the chart for the Ilkley performance, a Sun-Mars sextile (echoing the natal aspect) picks out Pluto (signifier of underworld transformation, the cave, vulture, raven, phoenix). Mercury is on Hughes' natal Mars in Gemini and sextile his Sun, with progressed Mercury square natal Mars, giving a double reference to the poet's double lives. His voice is charged by intimate histories – of the hunting "twins" of his youth, and of his sexual adventures (Mars). A knight who has conquered now surrenders his body, as ultimate selfhood beckons in the form of the Sun. A cockerel protagonist will ultimately be resurrected as a hawk, symbol of Horus and consort of the Goddess.

Inner alchemy, poetry and transformation

Hughes had been working on a nightmarish epic examining cruelty, destruction, guilt, and Western alienation from nature through the medium of Crow, an indestructible trickster-cum-shadow-figure, who is ultimately the Sun God Apollo (or Bran).48 Birds have long been associated with spirit flight, and are said to appear during the return phase of the underworld journey. Three weeks after Sylvia Plath's death, Leonard Baskin had found Hughes in "a great depressed state", and tried to rouse him by commissioning a poem based on his Crow engravings.49 But when Assia and Shura Wevill died he was forced to abandon Crow in the underworld. Cave Birds, which was begun in 1973 and performed at the Ilkley Literature Festival on 30th May 1975, is regarded as a continuation of Crow's journey. Keith Sagar comments that in Cave Birds Hughes "put himself in the dock of his own imagination".50 Biographical experience clearly informs the work, and occasionally surfaces. "The Scream", for instance, recollects the poet's childhood bedroom. The figure of "The Plaintiff" (in the later published version) alludes to Plath, the moon and desert being images for her pain. In First Fright, there are symbolically resonant references to bereavement practices involving mutilation. The protagonist's world has died. In my view, the astrology confirms that Hughes' proto-feminist theme of male guilt and female victimhood was rooted in a clear and consistent biographical process, and acknowledging the origin of the work in personal trauma illuminates rather than reduces it as art.

During May 1975 a partial solar eclipse (on the 11th, at 20 Taurus 0) fell sextile Hughes' natal Pluto (orb 2 minutes), conjunct natal Moon-Chiron and square natal Sun, then a total lunar eclipse (on the 25th, at 3 Sagittarius 24) fell square natal Neptune (orb 28 minutes), and applied square to the hamartia eclipse chart's ruling Venus. In the performance chart, five days later, we find two evocative oppositions in which Sun and Mars encounter their respective nemeses. (1) Apollo is opposed by Neptune, planet of primordial unity, continuing their dialogue from Hughes' natal chart, and squaring the hamartia eclipse chart Pluto-Venus opposite Chiron, with Sun closely square that Pluto (orb 23 minutes). The sense that this configuration refers back to the summer of 1962 increases when we realise that Hughes' progressed Moon, conjunct natal Pluto at that time, has now traversed half the zodiac to oppose natal Pluto, suggesting an eruption of visceral imagery and memory. (2) Mars, signifier of the egotistical warrior, is opposed by chthonic Pluto, the purging transformative preconscious force of nature, and its appropriation or propitiation. (Crow was published under the conjunction, and Birthday Letters under a square). Mars-Pluto might signify passion, violence, or the fires of hell, but also the rage that often accompanies grief. They are sextile and trine hamartia eclipse Mars, and aligned with Hughes' natal Venus square 7th-house Saturn, an image for the death of the beloved. Hughes' progressed Sun, symbolising his personal night sea journey, and illuminating that which is being brought to consciousness, underlines this latter association, being conjunct transiting Pluto and natal Venus,
and squaring natal Saturn. In *The Interrogator*, for instance, a vulture goddess (Pluto) becomes a keyhole for the Sun to spy through. Saturn was also applying towards a conjunction with natal Pluto. Paul Bentley suggests that *Cave Birds* may be “nothing more than a working through of depression”, and refers to Julia Kristeva’s discussion of the Black Sun as an image for the refuge of depression.\(^{31}\)

Most remarkably, perhaps, given that *Cave Birds* is structured around alchemical imagery, Hughes’ progressed Sun/Moon midpoint, the point of *conjunction* or inner marriage, was on 28 Scorpio 25, forming a close square to Hughes’ and Plath’s composite Sun/Moon, as well as to natal Sun/Neptune. If we read progressed Sun/Moon as a dynamic symbol for the search for psychic integration, this contact suggests, in quite precise way, that he was needing to revisit his first marriage. We are told that the plot of *Cave Birds* was constructed around two parallel stories, one an allegorical version of the trial of Socrates, and another dealing with a relationship between a man and a woman. This latter story begins with the disintegration of the woman and alienation of the man and proceeds towards her reconstitution and their re-union.\(^{32}\) Hughes may have found the performance of *Cave Birds* an ordeal, but composing the work evidently had a profound effect on him.\(^{33}\) He had good reason to delay his autobiography turn, however. There were other important deaths in 1976, and even under supportive circumstances, profound and complicated bereavement cannot be hurried.

When Hughes did begin to write directly about personal experience he approached the task with characteristic seriousness, conceiving it as a cabbalistic process of creative re-membering. Fittingly for someone born at Solar midnight, “fragments of light” would be recovered from even the darkest places.\(^{34}\) *Birthday Letters* was published in 1998 under a Sun-Uranus conjunction, signifying self-revelation, falling closely trine the *Cave Birds* performance Sun trine Pluto. (Uranus at noon was exactly trine performance Sun). There could hardly be a clearer astrological indication that a window had been opened on to the complex subject of *Cave Birds* and his cryptic material. The astrology of crisis and personal tragedy raises many questions, but when approached as a contemplative and healing practice, it offers another perspective on the subtle and complex workings of personal fate, and in some circumstances may help avert misfortune.

### Birth data: endnote

Biographer Dianne Middlebrook discovered a reference to a birth time of “Solar midnight” (1:12 BST) in a 1974 business letter in which Hughes wrote “we know the exact hour”. She was advised by astrologers Janet Booth and Joanne Wickenburg.\(^{35}\) Rodden gives other possible times, but note that according to Ann Skea, who knew Hughes, the astrological references in *Birthday Letters* (published on 29 January 1998, an elected date coinciding with Neptune’s ingress into Aquarius) include deliberate mistakes, probably for purposes of self-protection.\(^{36}\) Ted’s sister Olwyn Hughes, who is an astrologer, has declared John Etherington’s rectified time inaccurate.\(^{37}\) In a 1957 letter, Hughes speculates about being born “at one exact”. Crow was published on 12 October 1970.\(^{38}\) *Cave Birds* was first performed at the Ilkley Literature Festival (along with the poems subsequently collected as the Epilogue to *Gaudete*), at 8 p.m. on 30 May 1975 (source, Festival Programme).

### Endnotes

All charts use Placidus and True Node.

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.