



A New Perspective on Sylvia Plath’s “The Rival” and its Themes, Subject, and Inspiration

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Abstract

Numerous critics have attributed Sylvia Plath’s “The Rival” to a variety of inspirations, often Ted Hughes and his mistress, but an unfortunately overlooked subject is a miscarried child. Coupled with the possibility of Plath also suffering from an eating disorder (ED), this creates a new approach to studying the poem through the lens of what we know of mental disorders in mid-century America as well as her personal struggles during the period in which she drafted the poem.

Keywords: Poetry, Eating Disorders, Sylvia Plath, Anorexia Nervosa.

Introduction

Much has been written on the work (and life) of Sylvia Plath, yet even with the influx of critical analysis spanning 70 years now, very little has been written on how eating disorders may have informed and revealed themselves in her work. Food and hunger are long-standing totems that have been touched on, but that rarely extends to an analysis of the obsessive and perhaps clinical preoccupation with these subjects. In this paper, I offer an expanded and alternative means of considering “The Rival” using a lens of eating disorders and in consideration of medical texts of the time as well as other analyses in the past several decades to present.

1.1 Rivalry

Rivalry was a driving force behind Sylvia Plath’s literary success, and her tenacity when comparing herself to others is evidenced from an early age. At 15 years old while attending summer camp in 1947, she wrote to her mother, Aurelia Plath, about a Girl Scout troop that came to visit the campers—and her disgust at an overweight girl. This letter is held at The Lilly Library at the University of Indiana, Bloomington, where I was an Everett Helm Visiting fellow (2018–2019) and have photography permissions. Figure 1 shows the letter home from Plath to her mother dated 20 July 1947 (Mss. 2, Box 1). Plath wrote, “They were all cute except for one freak who scared Bets & me & looked like this,” Plath wrote amidst a drawing of a hairy, overweight girl. “But she was so utterly horribly slovenly that we kept away from her. I’m not so homely after all” (1947).

She aligned herself throughout her life with those she deemed equals or, better yet, those she saw as a few rungs higher on her perceived ladder to success. Such rivalry and competitiveness in healthy doses can be a springboard for bettering oneself, but at dysfunctional levels might reveal or exacerbate an eating disorder (ED). René Girard first

coined the concept of mimetic desire in his 1961 book *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, released just one year after Plath's debut collection *The Colossus and Other Poems (Colossus)*. Later in his career, Girard linked rivalry, and specifically the mimetic desire that encourages rivalry, to EDs like anorexia nervosa (anorexia) and bulimia nervosa (bulimia). His "Eating Disorders and Mimetic Desires" claims that:

Contrary to what the etymology of the word [anorexia] suggests, the anorexic has an appetite. She still wants to eat just as much as we do and much more, because she is hungrier than we are ... our modern bulimic is eating for herself, to be sure, but she is vomiting for others, for all these women who are watching eat other's waistlines. Her radical freedom is synonymous with her enslavement to the opinion of others. (Girard, 1996, pp. 4, 8)

Plath's many rivalries—and her appetite—were explicit throughout her journals, letters, and creative work. When Robert Lowell paired her with Anne Sexton in his 1959 workshop, Plath's jealousy was revealed in her journal. She called the coupling: "an honor, I suppose. Well about time. She has very good things, and they get better, though there is a lot of loose stuff" (Plath, 2000, p. 475). A letter to her husband, Ted Hughes, on 1 October 1956 exemplifies the competition between the couple throughout their relationship:

AND NOW FOR THE GREAT NEWS: sit down, take a long sip of beer and bless Henry Rago. POETRY has accepted SIX of my poems!!!!!!!!!!!! Like we dreamed of. Didn't I say the Fulbright would start the trigger? Strange, isn't it, that the day I come back last June, it's you; this time, it's me. (Plath, 2018, p.1257)

Plath punctuated such rivalries in her aptly named poem "The Rival" (Plath, 2004, p. 73). However, there is some debate over who exactly this rival was inspired by—and the larger question over whether it matters.

1.2 Who was Plath's Rival?

Vivian Pollak credits the rival in question to Marianne Moore (Pollack, 2005, p. 96). Plath had sent copies of her poems to Moore in 1959 when asking for a reference for a Eugene F. Saxton grant application (an award she ultimately received). Moore refused, calling the poems "grisly" and Plath "unrelenting" (Plath, 2000, p. 406). Plath dubbed Moore "so spiteful it is hard to believe it" in her journal following Moore's rejection, and it seems Pollak exclusively linked "The Rival" to Moore because of the line "Spiteful as a woman, but not so nervous" (Plath, 2004, p. 73). It is possible "The Rival" was inspired by Moore, but Pollack's reasoning is weak at best. Many others, like Robin Peel, consider "The Rival" directed toward Aurelia Plath "as is often assumed" due to the poem's mention of an influx of letters, which was common between Plath and her mother (p. 85). Susan Schwartz supports this theory and connected "The Rival" to Plath's "The Moon and the Yew Tree" because both poems feature a moon and, as Schwartz argues, the moon-as-mother. According to Schwartz, "The speaker of these poems violently rejects the smothering, controlling mother, whom she also envisages as an airless receptacle" (2013, p. 347). Such a description of the mother is in keeping with what was known and believed about EDs at the time. A 1950 report by Stanley Cobb claimed that, "In every one of our cases there were badly disturbed parental relations, usually with a scolding and overbearing mother" (Cobb, 1950, p. 179). Cobb also noted that the typical ED patient in mid-century America was a "good scholar" who "graduated with honors," both of which also describe Plath (Cobb, 1950, p. 143).

A journal entry from September 1951 included the admission: "I feed myself on the food of pride. I cultivate physical appearance—pride. I long to excel" (Plath, 2000, p. 100).

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Aurelia Plath preserved a number of accolades from Plath's childhood achievements, now held at The Lilly Library. These include, from Junior High School, alone five Scholastic awards (one dated 2 March 1949 and the others undated); six Certificates for Reading from the Department of Education's (DOE) Division of Public Libraries dated 1943–1944; six Honor Certificates also from the DOE Division of Public Libraries dated 1944–1946; seven Alice L. Phillips Junior High School Commendation Cards dated 1945–1947, each with unique specifications such as "being the only pupil in the history of the school to obtain a sixth school letter" and "unusual creative work in English;" and three Wellesley Club Certificates of Merit for Excellence in English Expression dated 1945 (Mss. 2, Box 9, f.12)ⁱ. It is impossible to know whether all her awards are preserved, but given Aurelia Plath's dedicated record-keeping, it can be assumed these Junior High School awards have been retained in totality. However, even if the archived awards are not comprehensive, what does remain is inarguably impressive.

There are still others, such as Suhair Nafie Abdul Aziz Al-Shaia, who claim that "The Rival" is actually about Hughes's mistress, Assia Wevill (née Gutmann), writing, "Assia Gutmann was Sylvia's rival whom she used as a sort of muse—rival in this poem ["The Rival] and 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'" (Plath, 2011, p. 331). However, Al-Shaia and those who agree with her overlook a key component of the timeline. By Plath's own account (her letters), she and Hughes did not meet Wevill until August 1961. She wrote in a letter to her mother dated 13 August, "Ted & I liked one couple, the boy a young Canadian poet, the girl a German-Russian [Wevill] whom we identified with" (Plath, 2018, p. 636). One draft of "The Rival" held at The Lilly Library includes a hand-dated note by Plath of July 1961, which makes any claims of "The Rival" being about Wevill null. I will be addressing the second draft of the poem held in the archives, selected because all drafts are nearly identical save for the addition of substantial handwritten notes on this draft.

1.3 Draft Analysis

The first draft of "The Rival" held at The Lilly Library includes the address at Court Green at the top, and it seems someone drew a line through the second stanza of Part 2. However, the line is not bold enough to determine whether Plath meant to delete it. Figure 2 shows the first page of the first draft of "The Rival" held at The Lilly Library (Mss.2 Box 1). The third draft *also* includes the Court Green address as well as a handwritten "July 1961" at the top.ⁱⁱ All three drafts in The Lilly Library include two additional parts to the poem, totaling eight additional stanzas, that are identical but never published. Regardless of who "The Rival" was inspired by, if anyone at all, it is a poem with surviving drafts worth a closer inspection. Plath's overt focus on rivalry alone in this poem provides insight into how she interacted with elements of rivalry in her life and, perhaps, its effect on her and her possible EDs.

Before addressing the stanzas that were removed by the time the poem was collected in *Ariel*, let us first consider the first four stanzas that did survive throughout the drafts and to publication. There is no denying the similarities between "The Rival" and "The Moon and the Yew Tree" which was also collected in *Ariel*, pointed out by Schwartz and others. For instance, "The Rival" includes the line, "Her O-mouth grieves at the world; yours is unaffected" while "The Moon" has the line, "With the O-gape of complete despair" (Plath, 2004, p. 73). "The Rival" has the line, "I wake to a mausoleum; you are here" and "The Moon" includes the line, "Separated from my house by a row of headstones" (Plath, 2004, p. 73). Six drafts of "The Moon" are held at The Lilly Library, including four pages of handwritten drafts followed by two typed drafts, with each typed draft dated 21 October 1961. We know, at least according to the archives that exist, that "The Moon" was written

shortly after “The Rival.” It is also possible that “The Moon” was being drafted at the same time as “The Rival” considering the undated handwritten drafts.

“The Moon” declares, “The moon is my mother” (Plath, 1963, p. 28). This is probably why many have attributed “The Rival” to Plath’s own mother, though it is important to keep the poems divorced to some degree from the poet. These two poems may be twinned in many ways, but “The Rival” compares what seems to be a person to the moon—not using the moon as a metaphor for a person (mother) as Plath did in “The Moon.” This is evidenced from the opening line that remained the same throughout the drafts to publication: “If the moon smiled, she would resemble you” (Plath, 2004, p. 73). “The Rival” suggests that the (likely human) subject of the poem is not female with the line, “Spiteful as a woman, but not so nervous” (p.73). Given the popular binary beliefs of gender and sex in mid-century America, this might lead us to assume the subject is male. Hughes would be the most obvious potential inspiration. This has been stated by some, such as Pamela Smith who claimed that “The Rival” was Plath “complaining to her husband” (Smith, 1972, p. 326).

1.4 Plath and Her Children

However, upon inspection of the discarded stanzas, a likelier possibility is that Plath’s children were the inspiration. Elaine Connell has called the “child poems” in *Ariel* “expressions of tenderness and protectiveness for children, which are opposed to the mother’s emotions of isolation and despair” (Connell, 1993, p. 80). Her daughter, Frieda Plath, was 14–16 months old in the summer of 1961. Alternatively, the baby Plath carried until her miscarriage on 6 February 1961, just five months prior to drafting “The Rival,” is an even more probable inspiration (Plath, 2018, p. 576). The subject of “The Rival” as miscarried foetus is a possibility that has been virtually overlooked in every previous analysis of the poem, though Tim Kendall found that an abundance of Plath’s poems from 1961 – 1962 depicted women “in relation to their fertility, or lack of it” (Kendall, 2001, p. 61). Consider the first stanzas of Plath’s poem in their entirety:

If the moon smiled, she would resemble you.
 You leave the same impression
 Of something beautiful, but annihilating.
 Both of you are great light borrowers.
 Her O-mouth grieves at the world; yours is unaffected.

And your first gift is making stone out of everything.
 I wake to a mausoleum; you are here,
 Ticking your fingers on the table, looking for cigarettes,
 Spiteful as a woman, but not so nervous.
 And dying to say something unanswerable. (Plath, 2004, p.73)

A baby girl like Frieda could be “Spiteful as a woman,” though of course not yet a woman—but a miscarried foetus might be perceived as even more spiteful. Dependent babies (again, Frieda) could certainly be considered “great light borrowers” and “beautiful, but annihilating” as they require much of their mother, but a miscarriage that devastates the mother is even more demanding and annihilating (Plath, 2004, p.73). Awakening to a mausoleum is a fitting description for the realisation of a miscarriage. The line “And your first gift is making stone of everything” echoes a lithopædion, otherwise known as a stone baby in ancient Greece. Stone babies are the result of a rare type of miscarriage in which the foetus’s body is too big for the mother’s body to absorb naturally. A calcified shell forms around the foetus—thus the colloquial term “stone baby.” Such a miscarried foetus with its “unaffected mouth” is almost

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literally "dying to say something" that most mothers would find unanswerable. The "dying to say something" also subtly echoes Plath's "Stillborn" (1960) ending line: "And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her" (Plath, 2016, p. 142). However, "Stillborn" was written in the summer of 1960, 6–7 months prior to Plath's miscarriage and overtly states that it is a metaphor for poems. Plath did not experience a stillborn birth, but the writing of "Stillborn" does reveal that she was exploring the stillborn as imagery in her creative work just one year prior to drafting "The Rival." A poem better matched to the era of "The Rival" is "Barren Woman" (19 February 1961), dated just 13 days after Plath's miscarriage. "Barren Woman" includes just two stanzas, the first of which seems to describe a mausoleum: "Museum without statues, grand with pillars, porticoes, rotundas" (Plath, 2016, p. 157). The second stanza again finds a moon that is hinted to also be a "mum" through Plath's adept language-weaving: "The moon lays a hand on my forehead, / Blank-faced and mum as a nurse" (Plath, 2016, p. 157).

1.5 "The Rival" and "The Moon"

Both "The Rival" and "The Moon" focus on the mouth, an image that Plath returned to again and again throughout her oeuvre. "Morning Song" includes a mouth that opens "clean as a cat's" while "Tulips" finds the flowers "opening like the mouth of some great African cat" (Plath, 2004, pp. 5, 18). "Paralytic" is one of Plath's last poems and features a wife with a "Mouth full of pearls" (Plath, 2016, p. 217). The repetitive "O" mouth imagery of a full moon in "The Rival" and "The Moon" are connected to grief and despair, but in the daylight the moon is described as "ridiculous" in "The Rival." Even when the gaping mouth is not visible in the sunlight, "dissatisfactions" arrive regularly through a thin slit of a mailbox. This description harkens back to Schwartz's calling what she called the mother of the poem(s) an "airless receptacle." The second half of the published version of the poem reads:

The moon, too, abases her subjects,
But in the daytime she is ridiculous.
Your dissatisfactions, on the other hand,
Arrive through the mailslot with loving regularity,
White and blank, expansive as carbon monoxide.
No day is safe from news of you,
Walking about in Africa maybe, but thinking of me. (Plath, 2004, p.73)

Lacking the yawning maw visible at night, the moon of "The Rival" still has a mouth in daylight hours—one that is thin, narrow, and receives nothing but dissatisfactions in the guise of letters "with loving regularity." Described as "White and blank, expansive as carbon monoxide" the mention of Africa seems an aside. However, Plath routinely expressed in letters before she became a mother her desire to travel to Africa and of course made a nod to "some great African cat" in "Tulips" (Plath, 2017, pp. 251, 287, 662). The closest she managed was a Rector in an English church who lived in Africa—or a day away from children. On 15 June 1962, she wrote to her mother, "It's exciting as a safari to Africa to me to think of a day away!" (2018, p.783). The Africa mention may not have been a clue to the subject of the poem, but rather sentimental regret of a life of carefree travel the speaker can no longer attain. Connell calls the *Ariel* poems indicative of Plath's development of a "distinct, female poetic identity" and a means of Plath's attempt to construct a different life than the one she led. The letters in "The Rival" fed through the slit of a mouth are sustenance deemed unappetizing, not filling, and dangerous.

1.6 Hunger in Plath's Personal Life

As Girard said, modern women with EDs are hungrier than others. Such hunger was certainly evidenced throughout Plath's life. As a teenager at summer camp in the 1940s, she wrote many letters to her mother, the majority of which including reports of the vast amounts of food she ate in a single sitting (Plath, 2017, pp. 10–12, 24–26). Her appetite was voracious, as demonstrated by this typical meal in 1945 where she fastidiously counted every morsel: “Lunch—two bowls of vegetable soup, loads of peanut butter, four pieces of coffee cake, chocolate cake and marshmallow [sic] sauce, three cups of milk. Supper—Haddock, nineteen carrots, lettuce and tomatoes, cucumber, punch, two potatoes, four slices of water melon [sic]! Boy! My stomach could hardly hold those two amounts of food” (Mss. 2, Box 1). Figure 3 shows the full 1945 letter from Plath to her mother.

She was 13 years old at the time, and her obsessive recording of meals in letters and journals was a habit that she kept well into adulthood. On 6 July 1945, shown in Figure 4 in the full letter, she again wrote to her mother and reported on her meal—and its results:

I was able to get my whole arm in the waist of my shorts before breakfast but after the following two meals I couldn't even get my little finger in! Shredded wheat, two muffins and crabapple jelly, four cups milk, and 40 raw cherries. Lunch three whole egg + lettuce sandwiches, three whole jelly sandwiches, five cups milk. I'm healthy and happy. (Mss. 2, Box 1)

As an adult, Plath's sister-in-law, Olwyn Hughes, allegedly accused Plath of “eating too much Christmas dinner” and supposedly told her, “I watched you eat Christmas dinner & you certainly stuffed yourself,” an attack Plath reported in letters to her mother and her psychiatrist Ruth Barnhouse Beuscher (Plath, 2018, p. 559, 563). By her own account, and that of others, Plath seemed an avid binge-eater. However, unlike most with binge-eating disorder (BED) Plath routinely did so in public. Plath also portrayed such a public purging in *The Bell Jar* (1981, p. 36). Albert Stunkard coined the term “binge-eating” as a disorder in 1959 and called these episodes “orgiastic” (Stunkard, 1959, p. 289). He also drew comparisons between BED and night-eating syndrome (NES), a syndrome he helped to name in 1955 (1955, p. 78). According to Stunkard, both disorders commonly occur during stress, but in BED there are also dissociative processes present (Stunkard, 1959, p. 289). Hilde Bruch's research in the 1950s was focused largely on obesity, but in her 1973 book on EDs and anorexia she supported many of Stunkard's ED claims. BED and NES are close bedmates. They and other forms of EDs often overlap as co-morbidities according to Hilde Bruch, and while it is possible for a person to have both BED and NES, there are still subtle differences between the two (Bruch, 1979, p. 123). NES often presents with “morning anorexia” followed by hyperphagia, or an increased appetite toward the evening, coupled with insomnia (Bruch, 1979, p. 122). BED in and of itself is strictly the bingeing stage and can take place at any time of the day or night. Plath exhibited both BED and NES in all facets of her writing, both personal and creative.

1.7 Night Eating Syndrome (NES)

The familiar image of a person with NES ravaging the pantry in the middle of the night can be found in Plath's letters. In 1956, she wrote to Hughes of such an incident that seems to combine insomnia with NES:

I read till midnight and then, with that wide-eyed wakeful tiredness, went to bed ... I tossed, tossed, dry-eyed, aching, with a terrible feeling that I needed to hit myself on the head with a hammer to knock myself out; my body seemed incredibly

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thistledowny and light, as if I needed weight after weight to hold it down from flying up; at two a.m. I had a sudden wild craving for ten buttered crackers with cheese and a glass of sherry; I leapt up, buttered myself ten crackers, with cheese, and poured a glass of sherry. (Plath, 2017, p. 1293–1294)

NES is reflected in the moon's progression in "The Rival." At night, the moon's "O-mouth" cannot smile as it is stretched open "grieving." A simple assessment is that the mouth is agape in sobs, but if considered through the lens of BED it might instead be a forceful—albeit unsatisfying—gorging. Bingeing is not a positive experience, with any satisfaction being very short-lived, and binges are often followed by shame and purging in those with bulimia.

If the grief does indeed result in sobbing, that is also a type of purging. The type of grief experienced by the open-mouthed moon is not named, but what is evident is that the O-mouth seems to remain ajar throughout the night. In the daylight hours when the mouth becomes a slim receptacle, it is fed blankness—nothing. At the same time, it is being stuffed with a whiteness Plath compares to carbon monoxide, the invisible (and expansive) killer that Plath used to assist her own suicide. Considering the acute possibility that the inspiration for "The Rival" is indeed a miscarriage, a grief followed by a purging of said grief by the moon-mother (the foetus's grandmother) is to be expected. However, for the mother, the one who experienced the miscarriage and loss of life, there is no mention of grieving in the published version of the poem. She is forced to live with the seemingly unwelcome "news of you [the foetus]" that is force-fed in a way through a clamped slit of a mouth.

We can glean much more of the poem's layers and possible interpretations through the examination of its drafts. The specific draft of "The Rival" I am addressing was originally titled "Poem." Plath crossed out this typed title and handwrote "The Rival" above it. The top of this draft also includes two handwritten notes: "S. Plath" and 240/6 in long division followed by "cancelled." Figure 5 shows page one of the second of three drafts of "The Rival" (Mss. 2 Box 1).

The bottom of the draft has two handwritten lists, one of which is a litany of poems:

The Rival
Facelift
Wedding Portrait
Rose Garden
Wuthering Heights
Stars Over the Dordogne. (Mss. 2, Box 1)

"The Rival" alone was included in *Ariel*. "Facelift" and "Wuthering Heights" were collected in the post-humous *Crossing the Water* (1971) and the remaining poems were not collected until *The Collected Poems*. This list suggests that Plath may have been considering collecting and sequencing these poems together, or at the very least had them in mind while she worked on "The Rival." There is a second list beside it, which appears to be a to-do list:

~~New Yorker poems~~ [*New Yorker*]
~~Quarterly poems~~ [*Poetry Quarterly*]
~~Mother, grampy~~, [illegible]
~~Aunt Freda~~
Mrs. Aldrich [many possibilities including Amy, Ann, Elizabeth "Libby," Elizabeth "Betty," or Sarah]
[illegible] (Mss. 2, Box 1)

The first page of this draft includes a typed second part of the poem with two stanzas. The first stanza reads:

Compared to you, I am as corruptible as a loaf of bread.
 While I sleep, the black spores nod
 Their magnified heads and plan to kill me as soon as possible;
 The wrinkles creep up like waves,
 One camouflaging itself behind another.
 I should have a steel complexion like yours
 In which the minutes could admire their reflections and forget about me [.] (Mss. 2, Box 1)

The speaker unfavorably compares herself to the subject, who she likened to the moon in Part 1. The moon and subject with their “steel complexion” are a far cry from the speaker’s vulnerabilities, “corruptible as a loaf of bread.” This description of the moon’s complexion also echoes the “Blank-faced” moon from “Barren Woman” (Plath, 2016, p.157). It is one of the many instances in Plath’s writing where the speaker equates herself with food—in this case, mouldy bread. When she was 13, she wrote a letter to her mother from her annual summer camp declaring that she was becoming a pig that could be slaughtered for pork. The full letter from Plath to her mother is shown in Figure 6 (Mss. 2, Box 1). The letter reads, in part:

For lunch I had a bird’s feed of 6 plates of casserole + sauce containing potatoes [sic], peas, onions, carrots, chicken (yum, yum)! Five cup of punch and a scoop of vanilla, coffee, and orange ice cream. (If you’re hard up on ration points when I come home you can have Joe slaughter me and you can eat me for pork. (Mss. 2, Box 1)

1.8 Slaughter in Plath’s Writing

The idea to slaughter a person for barbeque, virtually turning herself into a meal, persevered in Plath’s mind to adulthood, and is evidenced in works like “Mary’s Song” (Plath, 2016, p. 257). “The Jailor” opens with the speaker’s night sweats greasing the titular subject’s breakfast plate (Plath, 2004, p. 23). “The Surgeon at 2 a.m.” compares the speaker’s body to a garden with “tubers and fruits / Oozing their jammy substances” followed by “tissues in slices—a pathological salami” (Plath, 1971, pp. 30–31). However, when it comes to finding the speaker-as-bread, drafts of “The Rival” were not the first occurrence. In one high school assignment for English 21 titled “Artistic Description” Plath wrote for the “Taste” segment:

Long before it is ready to be eaten, baking bread sends enticing odors rising into the air, reminiscent of cozy old-fashioned kitchens and grandmother’s cooking. As the loaf is removed from the oven, it appears rather humble and unfestive [sic] in its somber brown crust, but oh! He who eats of the first slice cut from the loaf while it is still hot does not forget the wholesome, hearty flavor. The first bit [sic] savors of the elemental things in nature—the fragrant warmth contains the life-giving heat of the earth, and the taste satisfies the hunger of the palate for basic nourishment. The texture of homemade bread is unattainable in store-bought loaves. Flaky, crisp and toothsome is the crust; airy, light, and resilient is the bread itself, while the smooth, soothing texture of melted butter blends delectably with the whole combination. (Mss. 2, Box 10, f. 1)

Plath dubbed her notoriously lost novel with a couple of title options, including *Doubletake* and *Interminable Loaf*. A letter to her benefactor, Olivia Higgins Prouty, dated 20 November 1962, read:

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I hope to really get into my second novel this winter & finish it as soon as I get to London & can count on a mother's help. It is to be called "Doubletake", meaning the second you look at something reveals a deeper, double meaning. This is what was going to be the "Interminable Loaf"—it is a semi-autobiographical about a wife whose husband turns out to be a deserter and philanderer although she had thought he was wonderful & perfect. (Plath, 2018, p. 913)

Her appropriately named "Metaphors" (1959) compares a first-person speaker to a "riddle", "elephant", "ponderous house", "melon" and finally a loaf of bread (Plath, 1971, p. 43). Two years prior to writing "The Rival" Plath wrote "Metaphors" and the lines:

This loaf's big with its yeasty rising
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I've eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there's no getting off. (Plath, 1971, p. 43)

From bread loaf to a cow being fattened for loading onto the "train" en route for slaughter, "Metaphors" serves as a sort of precursor to the bread of "The Rival." The speaker in "Metaphors" is younger, a "cow in calf," similar to a loaf that's "big with its yeasty rising" and without a hint of decrepitness or mould.

Bread that sports "black spores" has far surpassed the onset stage of fuzzy white mould that can be scraped away. Plath situates this degree of degradation in drafts of "The Rival" alongside aging, as "The wrinkles creep up like waves." The speaker does not have, or no longer has, a flat "steel complexion," supporting the notion that the subject may be a baby or foetus. Having a firm complexion would ward off "the minutes" that attack the speaker like a fungus. Still, the speaker sees the subject as suffering, too:

What did you have to sacrifice
To come up out of [sic] the stones, down out of the stars
And put on such a usual body?
I have a baby like you.
You sat in the next room while I crawled on all fours,
A sow or a cow, no better.
Now you must be telling lies: the baby is smiling. (Mss. 2, Box 1)

The speaker acknowledges the sacrifices made by the subject, who came up out of stones, "down out of the stars." The moon is a stony satellite known for its lunar rocks that are naturally expelled from the surface. In some cases, meteors are formed from stones of the moon and make their way to the earth. If we consider the moon-as-mother (or grandmother in the case of "The Rival"), as is stated in "The Moon," we would see reflections in the moon's child and grandchildren—all present in this stanza. This is exemplified in the line, "I have a baby like you." If the speaker is addressing a foetus, she may be comparing a living child (like Frieda) to the child she is carrying.

The lines "You sat in the next room while I crawled on all fours / a sow or a cow, no better" begin to depart from what has thus far shown to be a linear showcasing of speaker-addressing-foetus. If Plath maintained the same "you" throughout the poem, the foetus, these lines may indicate the completion of a miscarriage with the foetus's body left in another room. Few details are known of the actual events of Plath's own miscarriage, though we do know her post-care was at home and not in hospital (Plath, 2018, pp. 576–577). Crawling about on all fours like "a sow or a cow" is certainly in keeping with how a woman might

physically respond during a miscarriage. There are also the notorious claims Plath made to Barnhouse in a 22 September 1962 letter that Hughes abused her just two days prior to the miscarriage: “Ted beat me up physically a couple of days before my miscarriage: the baby I lost was due to be born on his birthday” (Plath, 2018, p. 831). Little is known about the details of the alleged domestic abuse, but crawling on all fours in a physical attack preceding a miscarriage is not a difficult image to conjure.

1.9 “The Rival” Stanza Two

The second stanza of Part 2 of “The Rival” certainly echoes “Metaphors” but with one key shift. “Metaphors” shows “a cow in a calf” while “The Rival” features “a sow or a cow, no better” (Plath, 2016, p. 116, Mss. 2, Box 1). The former reveals an adult cow on the verge of blossoming from her youthful self. The latter compares the speaker as a four-legged pig or a cow, “no better.” Both are female farm animals meant to be fattened for the abattoir. The speaker seems accepting of this fate until she sees the mother-moon charming the child(ren) and coaxing smiles. At this point, a merging appears to happen between the moon and the subject, perhaps brought on by the foetus’s death—a return of sorts to the skies from which she came.

The speaker scrambles to shut away the subject-cum-moon in the first stanza of Part 3, perhaps embarrassed by her own perceived failures as a mother. In fact, when Plath wrote to her mother the day of her miscarriage, she apologized for what she saw as shortcomings: “I am as sorry about disappointing you as anything else, for I’m sure you were thinking of the birth as joyously as I was” (Plath, 2018, p. 576). Apologies continued in a letter that followed shortly after, dated 9 – 10 February 1961: “I do hope the sad news in my last letter didn’t cast you down too much. I foresaw how you’d enjoy sharing the good news with all our friends and relatives and only hope it hasn’t been too hard to contradict our optimistic plans” (Plath, 2018, p. 578). The first stanza of “The Rival” in Part 3 reads:

I try to think of a place to hide you
As a desk drawer hides a poison pen letter,
But there is no drawer to hold you.
Blue sky or black, you occupy my horizon.
What good is all that space if it can’t draw you off?
You are the one eye out there. (Mss. 2, Box 1)

Consider Figure 7 on page two of the second of three drafts of “The Rival” (Mss. 2, Box 1). The final stanzas take place outdoors. However, no other natural elements, from the sea to the sky or earth, appear to be a match for the moon. It seems to hold even more power now that it has become one with the foetus. The second stanza reads:

The sea, also, is ineffectual.
It keeps washing you up like an old bone.
And I, on the sky-mirroring, bland sands
Find you over and over, lipped like a skate and smiling,
With the sound of the sea in your mouth.
Angel of coldness,
Surely it is not I you want so badly. (Mss. 2, Box 1)

Plath inverts the usual relationship between the moon and sea. Instead of the moon dictating the motions (tides) of the sea, it is the sea that washes the moon—or reflections of the moon—up “like old bones.” The water carries the reflection of the moon to the shore where

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the speaker on "bland sands" finds the moon "over and over." Washed ashore, the moon is described as finally smiling even with a mouthful of saltwater. It is a stark contrast to what can be inferred from the first line of the poem, "If the moon smiled, she would resemble you." An "angel of coldness" is a fitting description of a miscarried foetus, and the final line of this stanza reveals the speaker's lack of confidence as a mother. It is not her the "angel" ultimately chose.

The final stanza of the draft is where the possibility of Plath's miscarriage inspiring the subject reaches an apex. The lines evoke an acute loss, sorrow, and missed opportunity:

I thought the Earth might use you.
She has a terrible way with minerals,
But even her tonnage doesn't impress a diamond.
Your facets are indestructible;
Their lights whiten my heart.
Toad-stone! I see I must wear you in the center of my forehead
And let the dead sleep as they deserve.(Mss. 2, Box 1)

The earth "might" have been able to use the subject, but since it has a "terrible way with minerals" this did not come to fruition. A fetus's sown mineral accretion begins to peak at mid-gestation. The primary bone-forming minerals include calcium, phosphorous, magnesium, and zinc with calcium being the most prevalent—which is the dominant mineral in the creation of calcified stone babies. Pregnant and breastfeeding women have long been advised to increase their mineral intake, especially calcium, as both the placenta and breastmilk need to be incredibly rich in the four aforementioned minerals to properly nourish a fetus and newborn. If we consider the subject of "The Rival" to be a miscarried foetus, that makes the speaker the earth. More fittingly, she is Mother Earth. Plath chose to capitalize "Earth" in this stanza even though she used the grammatical structure of "the Earth" which negates it being a proper noun in most circumstances. However, it remains a proper noun in this instance because the speaker herself has become the Earth.

Regardless of the weight, the "tonnage," of the Earth, she still "doesn't impress a diamond." Diamonds are one of the toughest of rocks, but at very high temperatures turn back into the vapor that created them. Ultimately, diamonds are a type of pure carbon. When carbon oxidizes, it becomes the gasses carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide, the same vapors a diamond reverts to at certain high temperatures. The letters arriving an expanding like carbon monoxide in Part 1 are found in these lines once more. The vast majority of carbon on earth is found in rocks, about 65,500 billion tons, as well as the ocean and atmosphere (Clemente, 2015, p. 50). Carbon is also found in meteorites, meteors that survive the fall to earth, or, as Plath put it, "down out of the stars" (Mss. 2 Box 1). Meteors can be formed from comets, asteroids, other planets—or even the moon. There are two primary types of meteors, the common chondrites and the much rarer carbonaceous chondrites. As the latter's name implies, carbonaceous chondrites are largely comprised of carbon as well as water or materials from water (Robert, 1982, p. 81). Plath's interest in Africa, found both in her personal life and "The Rival," also has ties to meteorites. The Vredefort Crater is the largest verified impact site in the world and is located in South Africa (Dietz, 1947, p.76). The meteorite Djermaia hit the African country of Chad on 25 February 1961, not long after Plath's miscarriage and just four days after penning "Barren Woman" (Corin, 1979, p. 502, Plath, 2016, p.157).

The line "Your facets are indestructible" could certainly describe a meteorite that survived an incredible journey from the heavens. Meteor showers with their brightness streaking across the sky are a stunning natural phenomenon, and such lights may be cause for

the whitening of the poem's speaker's heart. In the final two lines of the draft, the speaker seems to find some peace in her loss with the lines: "Toad-stone! I see I must wear you in the center of my forehead / And let the dead sleep as they deserve" (Mss. 2 Box 1). A toad-stone is a fossilized fish tooth featured heavily in folklore where it was said to be derived from the head of toads (Duffin, 2010, p. 3). The Kyranides, or Cyranides, a fourth century Greek compilation of magical/medical works, noted that the stone should be collected only during a waning moon—which might also be seen as a smiling moon with its glowing crescent (Kiranus, 1685, p. 60). The Kyranides claimed that the toad-stone was made from an "evil plant" that grew in the water and was capable of stopping the "Flux of women" (Kiranus, 1685, pp.51, 54).

The poem's speaker feels she must wear the toad-stone in the center of her forehead. This placement is over her third eye, similar to an Indian bindi, and we have already seen that the speaker considers the moon to have "the one eye out there" (Mss. 2 Box 1). Through this toad-stone placement, she blinds that omnipresent "one eye" and finally achieves the shutting away of her shame and sorrow. The toad-stone's alleged ability to stop a woman's bloodflow would typically be thought of as stopping a menstrual cycle. Amenorrhea (the stopping of a menstrual cycle) is a very common effect of anorexia and a goal for many anorectic women (Waller, 1964, p. 3). However, the use of a toad-stool could also be an attempt to stop the blood flux of a miscarriage, bringing an end to the crisis and reverting bodily control to the speaker. The draft ends with what seems to be acceptance and a naming of the event that shifts from metaphor to reality: "And let the dead sleep as they deserve" (Mss. 2 Box 1).

We cannot know why Plath chose not to publish Parts 2 and 3 of "The Rival" draft. Perhaps it was simply too personal. "Parliament Fields Hill" is famously known for addressing a miscarriage, but of course it was not Plath's choice to collect it (Plath, 1971, p.7). What is known is that Plath took an aggressive trimming to "The Rival," cutting and deleting two-thirds of the poem by the time it appeared in *Ariel*. The published version ended with a focus on the speaker, "thinking of me" (Plath, 2004, p. 73). The draft's final line which focused on others, the dead, was ultimately rejected by Plath. This decision in and of itself is a reclamation of control and a poignant example of Plath's ability to slice away at her own work, processing facets of grief in drafts to create an end result that was smaller, cleaner, and brought the focus back to the "I" of the poem.

Endnotes

¹ The complete award dates and specifications include Scholastic art awards achievement key dated 2 March 1949; Scholastic Magazines Certificate of Merit for Achievement in Writing (honorable mention), undated; Scholastic Magazines Certificate of Merit for Achievement in Art in the National High School Art Exhibition, Fine Arts Galleries, Carnegie Institute (A place), undated; Scholastic Magazines Certificate of Merit for "fine art work was included in the Massachusetts regional exhibition preliminary to the selection of finalists for the National High school Art Exhibition in the Fine Arts Galleries", undated; and Scholastic Magazines Certificate of Merit, RH White's award (Achievement Key in the Mass. Regional Art exhibition), undated. Certificates for reading from the DOE Division of Public Libraries are dated 15 December 1943 (two awards on this date); 20 January 1944; 24 March 1944; and 5 June 1944 (two awards on this date). Honor certificates for reading from the DOE Division of Public Libraries are dated 3 May 1944; 18 November 1945; 12 June 1945; and 7 June 1943 (three awards on this date). Alice L. Phillips Junior High School Commendation Cards are dated 11 June 1945 for being "the only pupil in the history of the school to obtain a sixth school letter;" 18 June 1945 for "unusual creative work in English;" 21 June 1945 for "outstanding quality of oral and written work, for her careful applications to daily work, and for helpfulness in class discussion;" 22 January 1947 for "excellence in spelling;" June 1945 [no specific day noted] for "excellence in taking care of War Stamp sales;" 11 June 1947 for "excellence work in art throughout her Junior High School years;" and 10 June 1947 for "maintaining a scholarship record of all A's and B's for three years." Wellesley Club Certificates of Merit for Excellence in English Expression are dated 11 June 1945; 20 June 1945; and one certificate is undated.

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¹Oddly, Plath's letters state that she and Hughes did not plan to move into the Court Green address until 31 August 1961 (*Letters vol. 2* 640). It is possible she returned to these poems and pre-dated one of the Court Green drafts to July. If this is the case, the discrepancy of these dates span just a few weeks and still dates the drafts well before Hughes began his affair with Wevill.

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