

May Swenson's Spiritual Quest

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I'm on a search, although I didn't deliberately set out to make a search in poetry. I have a philosophical bent which harks back to a religious background that I abandoned. Other poets may not be on any search other than into their own selves. But I've been on a search into the universe and the human mind. (Hammond 75)

Although as an adult May Swenson did not practice the Mormonism of her family, her early beliefs had a lasting impact on her psyche that affected her poetry. On several occasions Swenson expressed what might seem a paradox about herself. For example, in a 1977 interview she said, "I'm not religious. . . . I was brought up very strictly in a religious way, which made me turn away" ([Draves and Fortunato] 23), but in the same interview, when asked whether she had been influenced by her "religious upbringing," she answered, "Yes, I think I would say so" (27). That Swenson both distanced herself from

May Swenson's poems "Creation," "My Poems," and "God," © copyright The Literary Estate of May Swenson. Used by permission of The Literary Estate of May Swenson.

her early religious training and at the same time was influenced by it is confirmed by Rozanne Knudson, who writes that although Swenson stopped attending church except when she visited her parents, “she never asked to be stricken from the rolls of the church, nor was she excommunicated—merely considered ‘inactive’ by the Manhattan Ward.” Knudson adds, “A careful reading of the body of her work reveals her questioning of Mormon beliefs, but not a complete rejection of her parents’ faith” (Knudson and Bigelow 40). The question of Swenson’s religious belief becomes important because her early faith prompted her to search for meaning in “the universe and the human mind,” a search she carried out in her poetry.

Very early in her development as a poet, Swenson linked the project of poetry with that of religion. As early as her college years, she told her friend Edith Welch, “religion . . . seems like a redundancy for a poet” (qtd. in Knudson and Bigelow 34), implying that the work of the poet somehow overlaps with or is similar to the work of religion. In “The Poet as Antispecialist” in 1965, Swenson quoted Aldous Huxley: “The world is poetical intrinsically, and what it means is simply itself. Its significance is the enormous mystery of its existence and of our awareness of its existence” (97). She then elaborated further:

Who or what are we? Why are we? And what are we becoming? What is the relationship between man and the universe? Those are questions that ached in the mind of the first poet. They can be said to have created the first poet, and to be the first source of the art of poetry. Does the fact of our consciousness, unique and seemingly miraculous among all of nature’s creatures, *a priori* indicate a super-consciousness shaping and manipulating the cosmos? (97)

These questions do not necessarily identify what moves all poets to write, but they surely can be taken as Swenson’s impetus. Twelve years later, she noted that “one of the impulses of the artist” is “to unravel the mysteries” ([Draves and Fortunato] 23). Her entire gesture towards poetry, then, is located in the same type of quest saints and mystics of most religions have undertaken: to search for God and the mysteries of life (including creation of the earth, the universe, human life, the human mind, and all other life forms). Because Swenson’s professed

project in poetry was to ask these deepest questions of existence, to look for evidence of her spiritual quest in her poems is legitimate and useful; indeed, to ignore spiritual questions embodied in them is to refuse many of the possibilities of meaning she intended.

Although the word *spiritual* is often associated with devotion to a specific faith, Swenson seems to have conceived of the term as an attitude toward existence.¹ In a memorial service at her death, her brother Roy said she once told him, “Life is a mystery. We must not give ourselves airs. We are not the apex of creation. It is all evolving. We don’t know what the answers will be” (qtd. in Knudson and Bigelow 124). This quotation suggests several important qualities of spirituality: awareness of the grandeur, complexity, and vastness of creation; humility in realizing human limitations; respect for all creation; a search for greater knowledge; and an openness to discovery. The characteristics Swenson’s youngest brother, Paul, attributed to her are also those of spirituality: “a studious devotion, a bottomless curiosity, a heightened capacity for wonder and awe, a refusal to sentimentalize or trivialize the intensity or infinite variety of life experience” (26). All these traits are associated with an inquiry into the mysteries of existence and so may be termed spiritual, whether such inquiry occurs within the framework of a specific religion. Others have also noticed these characteristics in Swenson’s poetry. Despite her rejection of the label “religious,” Dave Smith in reviewing Swenson’s *New and Selected Things Taking Place* (1978) finds exactly that quality in her work. He calls her temperament “always religious and never orthodox” and says,

[Swenson] believes, apparently, that the world functions according to some hidden final purpose, and furthermore that a right apprehension ultimately reveals a Coleridgean interconnectedness of all parts. . . . She has found or accepted no answer except her intuited conviction that all is interconnected and rooted in love” (293, 291).

¹This is not to imply that Swenson was not influenced by specifically Mormon doctrines. See my “‘I Do Remember How It Smelled Heavenly’: Mormon Aspects of May Swenson’s Poetry” and Paul Crumbley’s essay in this issue of *Literature and Belief*. Here, however, the focus is on more general aspects of Swenson’s spiritual quest.

Nevertheless, in examining the spiritual quest Swenson carries out in her poetry, one should also keep in mind that she was stubbornly independent and valued authentic personal examination above almost everything else. In "Some Quadrangles," a poem she wrote for Harvard's 1982 Phi Beta Kappa Society annual induction of new members, Swenson advises, "*Don't be a clone. Don't do what the others / do*" (75), and "Get up, get out on the fresh edge / of things, away from the wow and flutter. Stand alone. / Take a breath of your own" (76). Later, in an interview with Lee Hudson, she said of these lines, "I am being absolutely literal and serious when I give that advice" (63), her seriousness emphasized by her use of italics in the poem. Claiming such independence of thought for herself, Swenson assumed the right to ask any questions; thus, if one reads superficially, some of her poems may seem audacious and irreverent, but, examined more carefully, they reveal her deep inquiry and testing of ideas.

One of the questions Swenson asked concerned the very existence of God. She described herself as an agnostic. Her sister Ruth Swenson Eyre reports that she once asked Swenson, "May, do you believe in God?" and she answered, "I don't know that there is one, but I don't know that there isn't" (14), an answer arising not from indifference but from a lack of knowledge. Indeed, the question of the existence of God was weighty enough to occupy Swenson's mind throughout her writing life.

For someone who was unsure about His existence, Swenson writes about God with surprising frequency. In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop, dated May 2, 1962, responding to Bishop's critique of the manuscript for Swenson's poetry collection *To Mix With Time: New and Selected Poems* (1963), she said that she'll "bury God and the Universe somewhere they'll be less conspicuous," but adds, "Fact is, I have a larger group of poems 'on the same theme' that got written last winter" (235).²

²In *To Mix With Time* Swenson left her poems as she had originally planned; the first two are called "The Universe" and "God." Alicia Ostriker observes that there was probably no other American poet with the audacity to use

The poem “God” that Swenson referred to in the letter to Bishop demonstrates both her independent, irreverent questioning and the depth of her inquiry about God. It uses a space in each line to emphasize the distance between humans and God, between human inquiry and omniscience:

| | |
|-----------------------------|--------|
| They said there was a Thing | |
| that could not | Change |
| They could not | Find |
| it so they | Named |
| it | God |

But is God merely a name, the poem asks:

| | |
|----------------|--------|
| The | Name |
| was | God |
| the | Thing |
| that could not | Change |

Even though “they” (humans, generally?) could not find it, they named it and then said, “it must be There / It had a Name.” And then when it could not be found, they called it

| | |
|-------------|---------------|
| | Changeless |
| It is | God |
| The | Name |
| is clue The | Thing |
| is | Lost |
| | Somewhere (4) |

So, the poem asks, have humans created God, using fallacious circular reasoning, to embody what is eternal or changeless, an ideal sought but not found in an existence bound by time and mortality? That may be the sense many readers take from the poem, but there are other aspects of it that suggest such a reading is too simplistic. Swenson often

aligned her poems in two columns as she does here, and in this case the very structure of the poem suggests the limited human struggle to comprehend God. The parts of each line that create the left column are irregular, shifting in length between one word and five words, the length of each line variable. This column seems to embody graphically the struggle of thought, as humans try to comprehend God. In each line there is a leap to the other column that represents God, and in every line the reader has to make that leap. Furthermore, the right column always consists of only one word. This column descends the page in an orderly, constant, perhaps “changeless” fashion, qualities attributed to God. Thus, reaching the column of the poem that seems graphically to represent God requires a leap across white space approximating the leap of faith necessary to make any knowledge of God possible. The ending of the poem, too, suggests something more than that humans have made God up:

| | |
|------|------------|
| They | Found |
| the | Name |
| The | Name |
| is | Changeless |
| | God. (4) |

Although humans have not been able to find God, at least they have been able to understand what is changeless and therefore beyond them, and they have used language to name that concept, to identify deity. In these ways the poem comments on the great difference between humans and God and on the inability of humans to throw themselves across the void and comprehend what is infinite and unchanging (i.e., God), thus pointing toward Swenson’s own spiritual quest.

Another early poem, “A Dream,” seems even more radical in its questioning. Beginning with the line “I was a god and self-enchanted,” it also questions how God has come into being: has the speaker of the poem (Swenson, presumably) turned herself into a god? Because this god “stood in a cabinet in the living wood” behind doors

“carved with the sign of the lizard” and “wore a mask of skin-thin silver” (291), the poem also evokes the gods of early civilizations—carvings, animals, celestial bodies, trees, and masked humans. How does one explain those gods, the poem asks. The speaker says, “I lived by magic,” and then reveals the source of that magic: “A little bag in my chest held a whirling stone / so hot it was past burning / so radiant it was blinding.” What of the supernatural powers attributed to God? Are they real or magical? And as those supernatural powers can blind, if not burn, are they good or evil? The poem then seems to question the relationship of God to the cosmos: “When the moon rose worn and broken / . . . / her ray fell upon the doors which opened / and I walked in the living wood” (291). It is interesting that the speaker, though a god, is not free to move until the moon touches the doors of her cabinet. Does the poem suggest, then, that humans link the notion of God to the power of the cosmos? Have humans called these heavenly bodies gods because they are such a mystery and because humans realize that without the sun, particularly, life would be impossible? These are not the questions that arise in most Christian traditions, but they are serious inquiries into how earthly perceptions might have shaped the concept of deity.

Remember, however, that the poem, as its title indicates, is a “dream” and therefore an exploration, perhaps at least partially from Swenson’s subconscious, of the ageless human search for God or for the power that would make humans godlike. Throughout the poem limitations prevent any sort of transcendence to power or omniscience, as though even in dream, humans can scarcely approach God and cannot imagine omnipotence. The god/dreamer is trapped inside a “cabinet in the living wood” and can only “walk in the living wood” after the moon’s rays touch the cabinet’s doors. The moon itself is described as “worn and broken / her face like a coin endlessly exchanged / in the hands of the sea” (291), suggesting that human attention distorts and trivializes the cosmos as people try to perceive it within their limited systems; the “endless” preoccupation with wealth has damaged and altered their ability to perceive the moon and receive power from it. The power the speaker/god obtains from the moon, the ability to walk, lasts only until morning, when the speaker/god must return to her

cabinet. Even the magic is limited: the “whirling stone” in the speaker’s chest is paradoxically too hot to burn but so bright that it is blinding. Furthermore, isn’t this “whirling stone” in “a little bag in [her] chest” a metaphor for her heart? If so, the poem suggests that the source of a human/god’s magic or any supernatural power is the heart or perhaps the emotion often attributed to it—love—or that the power the heart supplies is life itself, and that being alive is the extent of human magic.

These poems show a serious inquiry into the nature and identity of God, or what one can perceive as God, but they don’t approach God and therefore seem to suggest primarily how difficult it is for humans to envision God. There are many other poems, however, that suggest God’s infinite power and omniscience and embody a human attempt to know Him. One of these, “My Poems,” not published in Swenson’s lifetime, seems to be skeptical of the concept of God but goes much farther in its suggestions about Him:

My poems are prayers to a god
to come into being.

Some mornings I have seen his hair
flash on the horizon,

Some nights I have seen his heel there
clear as the moon.

My poems pray him to be
manifest like lightning

In one pure instant abolish
and recreate the world. (Qtd. in Knudson 90)

Gudrun M. Grabher uses this poem as evidence that for Swenson “her poetry, obviously, was her religion.” Grabher explains that “[t]he request is addressed not to God, but to *a* god, the indefinite article rendering

the addressee undefined, vague, unidentified. The continuation of the thought in the run-on line challenges not only this god's identity but even his existence" (82), which argument seems to repeat what a superficial reading yields in the poems discussed above: that God is created by humans for their purposes (in this poem, in order that Swenson might write more powerfully).

But Swenson's own discussion of writing poetry in "The Poet as Antispecialist" calls for another interpretation of "My Poems." She describes "the experience of [writing] poetry" as being "based in a craving to get through the curtains of things as they *appear* to things as they *are* and then into the larger, wilder space of things as they *are becoming*" (16). She is cognizant of human limitations in comprehension—"one gets the inkling that there are extra senses as yet nameless, within the apperceptive system, if one could only differentiate them and identify their organs"—and, therefore,

The poetic experience . . . is one of constant curiosity, skepticism, and testing—astonishment, disillusionment, renewed discovery, re-illumination. It amounts to a virtual compulsion to probe with the senses into the complex actuality of all things, outside and inside the self, and to determine relationships between them. (16)

Is it not likely, then, that when she says that her poems are "prayers to a god / to come into being," she is expressing her hope that her poems will somehow transcend human limitations in perception? The next lines in the poem, in which she catches glimpses of this god, seem to be a poetic expression of the ideas in this prose passage:

unlike the fly, man is sorely conscious of the vastness of the unknown beyond his consciousness. The poet, tracing the edge of a great shadow whose outline shifts and varies, proving there is an invisible moving source of light behind, hopes (naively, in view of his ephemerality) to reach and touch the foot of that solid whatever-it-is that casts the shadow. If sometimes it seems he does touch it, it is only to be faced with a more distant, even less acces-

sible mystery. (16)

The “hair” of the god Swenson sees “flash[ing] on the horizon” in the poem is a different metaphor for the same concept expressed in the essay as a “great shadow” that proves the “invisible moving source of light” behind it. She even uses a similar synecdoche to describe the concept in both pieces; she says in the poem that she sometimes sees the “heel” of the god on the horizon, while in the essay she says the poet hopes to “touch the foot of that solid what-ever-it-is that casts the shadow.”

Another passage in the essay is even clearer in expressing what Swenson means: “A complete and firm apprehension of the Whole tantalizingly eludes [the poet]—although he receives mirages of it now and then that he projects into his work” (16). Grabher in her analysis of “My Poems” says that “Swenson thus inverts the common understanding of prayers as requests to the god whose existence is automatically presupposed. She sees her poems as prayers that invoke, in the first place, the being of a god” (82–83); in other words, the god Swenson brings into being in her poems exists only within those poems and is a construct of her imagination. But in light of Swenson’s own discussion of what “the poet” does—and one may logically presume that “the poet” she writes about is herself—the trope she uses in the poem of bringing the god into being refers to her desire to achieve in her poems greater contact with the omniscience she has sometimes perceived in the world. To be fair to Grabher, as she continues her analysis, she notes “the ambiguity, even the paradoxical contradiction” of the poem and concludes that “[t]he god [Swenson] has evoked is both inside the mind of his creator and outside her mind, haunting space” (83). Finally, both readings of the poem perceive it as part of Swenson’s spiritual quest.

Many other Swenson poems record similar glimpses of something infinite or beyond the comprehension of the poet.³ In “Camping in Madera Canyon,” for example, Swenson and her companion arrive,

³See especially “The Poplar’s Shadow,” “As Long Ago as Far Away,” “The Surface,” “Any Object,” and “The Blue Bottle,” all of which suggest infinity,

put up their tent as night falls, and then go for a walk in the dark, watching the “sharp-petaled stars” and listening to “a string of small toots— / nine descending notes—the whiskered owl’s signal” (119). The next morning the campers awaken in the cold, “sense the immense / volcano, sun, about to pour / gold lava” over them, make coffee, listen to the “flutes and pluckings, / buzzes, scales and trills” of the birds, and walk along the road. The sensory language—the warmth of the sun after the cold night, the songs of the birds—puts the reader in the midst of the experience. Then, the speaker says, “Night hid this day. What sunrise may it be / the dark to?” What one perceives as a radiant, bright morning, Swenson suggests, may be darkness in comparison to a greater light, the “invisible moving source of light” she describes in her essay. “Flying Home From Utah” creates a similar sense of magnitude in the cosmos. In it Swenson sees from an airplane forests as “branches of a tree lying down” and near the end of the poem says, “I dream I point my eye over a leaf / and fascinate my gaze upon its veins.” After a careful description of this leaf, she completes the poem:

One leaf of a tree that’s one tree of a forest,
that’s the branch of the vein of a leaf

of a tree. Perpetual worlds
within, upon, above the world, the world
a leaf within a wilderness of worlds. (176-77)

Swenson here suggests that earth may be no more in magnitude than a single leaf compared to the forest, which forest is itself just a “branch of the vein of a leaf” of a greater tree, the striking visual imagery emblematic of the infinity of creation expanding and expanding beyond one’s ability to comprehend it.

Swenson said that such intimations of eternity sometimes came to her as she wrote her poems. In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop, dated June 24, 1958, she said, “The poems that I think are worth something (a few) that I’ve done have *come* to me, from somewhere—it hardly feels as

though I made them” (226). In her essay “A Poem Happens to Me,” which she also probably wrote in the mid-1950s, she further explains the process through which such poems have come into being: “The act of creation itself (and I believe most artists will be obliged to admit this) . . . is unlike any other experience.” She cannot find adequate words for the experience; the term she settles on to explain “the creative act” is “*omniscience*” (76). She goes on to describe the experience in mystical terms:

I am closeted within my mind, and my body moves about obediently on the other side of that transparent door, quite efficiently but beyond my notice.

. . . I become perfectly still, my eyes turned in one fixed direction.

Sometimes it is many minutes before the first words of the dictation come. When it comes, my hand, with the pencil, rises. Rises and begins to write—lightly and fleetly, pausing now and then as if to listen. On many occasions I remember relaying to my hand a mental aside, namely: Do not be abrupt; be careful or you will frighten away the fish! In the first moments anxiety poises the mind at [the] very pinpoint of concentration to catch the thought—for the balance between obscured reception and perfect articulation is extremely precarious. . . .

After the main kernel, the nucleus, the lifestuff, has been translated—given form or body—the automatic quality of the translation may wear off, gradually, like ether. And again I return to the familiar jacket of my flesh. I relax. (77)

A more cerebral process of revision may follow the reception of a poem, and only a few poems come to her in such a visionary experience. But when one does come in this fashion, Swenson experiences a “physical and mental elation” after writing it, “a thing quite outside, and if I may say so, superior to almost any other satisfaction” (78). Again, these “given” poems are the ones Swenson considered her most significant.

Her description of receiving them suggests that she more or less

channeled them and that during their reception she felt herself in contact with something she might have perceived as God. Therefore, it is likely that Swenson considered God's process of creation in comparison with her own. "Creation," one of her first published poems, takes up this very matter:

It is a stern thing,
This bringing into being;
This taking of a clod that is cold
And veining it with sprouts of fire;
This wresting of a star from chaos,
And chiseling it upon the lathe of exactness;
This making of an indolent thing urgent;
This begetting of eagerness;
It is a hard and a fierce thing . . .
Did You find it so, God? (275)

Though here Swenson describes creation as "a stern thing," and "a hard and a fierce thing," other lines suggest the euphoria of creation: "veining [a clod that is cold] with sprouts of fire," "wresting a star from chaos." The abstractions of the poem seem particularly rewarding: the "making of an indolent thing urgent" and "the begetting of eagerness." Because Swenson is creating a poem about what God might have done in creating the world, it is not difficult to imagine her comparing the creation of her own poems with God's creation of the cosmos.

In fact, in much of her poetry Swenson examines minutely what the religious might call the creations of God. Much of her work focuses on nature in all its variety. Rosemary Johnson writes that "[Swenson's] close, first-hand observation of the external world, coupled with scrupulous attention to the particular, labels her . . . a 'naturalist'" (50). Johnson notes that one can go to Swenson's poems for "biology, zoology, geology, physics, some astronomy, and a little anthropology," a conclusion she comes to in a review of only one volume of Swenson's poetry, *New and Selected Things Taking Place*.

But rather than perceiving Swenson's attention to the natural world as part of her spiritual quest, many have seen it as her substitute for reli-

gion. In his foreword to *May Swenson: A Poet's Life in Photos* (1996), Richard Wilbur says,

One thing she did not bring east was Mormonism, or any other kind of church religion. . . . What May put in the place of any supernatural view was a truly knowledgeable awareness, rare among poets of our time, of the world as perceived and probed by contemporary science" (2).

But Swenson's use of science as one of her tools for examining the world lay within the parameters of her spiritual search.

First, it is important to understand that Swenson thought nature included everything: "the entire universe, the city, the country, the human mind, human creatures, and the animal creatures" (Hammond 60). She also felt that the more one understands of nature, the closer one will be to infinite truth. "Miniature as we are in the gigantic body of the cosmos," she writes, "we have somehow an inbuilt craving to get our pincers of perception around the whole of it, to incorporate infinitude and set up comprehensible models of it within our little minds. Poetry tries to do this in its fashion" ("Poet" 16). Of course, Swenson used any evidence she could obtain in creating "comprehensible models of infinitude" for her readers, and there is evidence that she had great respect for science as a source of legitimate discoveries about that infinitude. "If there is any hope for understanding the world or understanding the universe, I think that the closest thing we have to it is the discoveries of science," she said but then added, "The artist and the scientist are our two hopes" ([Draves and Fortunato] 23). In "The Poet as Antispecialist" she also identifies science and poetry as the two enterprises for comprehending "infinitude" but explains that "their instruments, methods, and effects are quite divergent." The "contrasts" she notes "between science and poetry are easily illustrated by such apparent opposites as: objective/subjective, reason/intuition, fact/essence," or, she emphasizes, "let me boldly say: material/spiritual" (16). Swenson realized that science by itself can provide the objective, rational, material facts, but that such an enterprise cannot reach the whole of "infinitude." The poet's subjective, intuitive apprehension of "essence" or—and she emphasizes this—the

“spiritual” is the contribution poetry can make to the expansion of human knowledge of the infinite.

To create that spiritual essence is exactly what Swenson endeavored to achieve in her poetry. She once said, “I think of my poems as ‘things’ rather than messages made of words” (Hammond 70). Poetry, as she practices it,

doesn’t talk *about* something. It presents the thing to your senses, so that it can be grasped whole. . . . I think of a poem as a mobile, almost a construct, something you can look around, that moves, that is concrete. You can almost hold it in your hand. I think of it as projecting to the reader something more actual, more graspable by his senses, than just words on the page. (65–66)

There is a sense in this description that she is trying to make an object, a little world, if you will, with each poem.

Interestingly, Swenson does not often use the word “God”; and when she does use it, her inquiry seems irreverent or audacious, causing many scholars to conclude that she eschews the spiritual for the scientific. However, if one brings together the words and phrases she does use to describe what she is seeking to comprehend—“a superconsciousness shaping and manipulating the cosmos,” “the vastness of the unknown beyond [human] consciousness,” “the edge of a great shadow whose outline shifts and varies, proving there is an invisible moving source of light behind,” “a more distant, even less accessible mystery,” the “solid whatever-it-is that casts the shadow,” “the Whole,” and “Perpetual worlds / within, upon, above the world”—Swenson’s spiritual quest cannot be doubted and ought always to be part of the critical examination of her astonishing work.

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Swenson on the Square in Santa Fe, 1972
(Courtesy of Paul Crumbley)