

“Repentance” and May Swenson’s Return to the Faith

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May Swenson’s previously unpublished poem “Repentance,” written in 1933, presents a speaker who has discovered the delights of expressing what she refers to as her “pagan” soul, only to revert to the narrow path of Christian belief. This is an unusual poem in the Swenson canon because the speaker appears to be the victim of external forces and therefore not in command of her own thoughts, feelings, and actions. Repetition of the clause, “there was the day,” appearing three times in this twenty-line poem, casts the speaker’s fall from paganism in a wistful, reflective light and suggests that she refuses to accept her conduct as the last word on who she is and how she will behave in the future. Twenty-one years later, in 1954, Swenson would write another poem, “Deciding,” in which her speaker celebrates the process of decision-making absent in “Repentance”; rather than situating herself in the time that either precedes or follows a decision, this later speaker relishes the transforming power of prolonged indecision that she at one point refers to as “wishes for delicious opposites” (36). For the speaker of “Repentance,” though, as perhaps for the twenty-year-old Swenson who wrote it, sustaining the fluid uncertainty of unresolved decisions may not yet have been an option.

At the time she wrote “Repentance,” Swenson was a student at Utah

State Agricultural College (now Utah State University), where she actively participated in a group of free-thinking young writers who dared to taste what might well be considered the forbidden fruits of pagan thought. This was the time of the Great Depression, when confidence in the institutionalized values of a previous generation was waning, and many students were actively seeking new forms of thought and experience that would lead them away from what they saw as the errors of the past. In “‘Leftward March’: 1930s Student liberalism at the Utah State Agricultural College,” Robert Parson links Swenson to Ray B. West, Jr., Austin Fife, Veneta Nielson, and Grant H. Redford, all of whom contributed to *Scribble*, the campus literary magazine. One of Swenson’s closest friends at the time, Edith Welch, recalls that West brought a copy of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) to a meeting at Fife’s house where “the group of scribblers read it together” (Knudson and Bigelow 33). Parson notes that West had smuggled the volume into the United States when returning from a mission in France for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints prior to 1933, the year when an official ban on the book was rescinded (173). R. R. Knudson comments further on Swenson’s response to *Ulysses*, pointing out that Swenson “was bowled over by it, by the fresh language and rhythm of the sentences” (33). Swenson’s willingness to brave censure by admitting the achievement of a book widely viewed by the public as unacceptably sexual might easily have contributed to her growing sense of her own pagan sensibility. When the speaker in “Repentance” describes her “pagan” soul as “wrapped with wind / Of a long bright yearning” (ll. 6, 8–9), she clearly associates the pagan self with sensual appetite, if not sexual desire.

It should come as no great surprise, then, that this same group of students who defied conventional morality by enthusiastically reading *Ulysses* also “embraced a philosophy that simultaneously celebrated and opposed their shared Mormon culture” (Parson 170). This combination of both acceptance and rejection registers forcefully in the tensions Swenson builds into the affirmation and denial of a pagan self that is so central to “Repentance.” Swenson’s comment to Welch during her student years that “religion seems like a redundancy for a poet” (qtd. in Knudson and Bigelow 34) suggests that she was not yet prepared to in-

habit a middle ground between the faith in which she was reared and the rebellious impulses she labels “pagan” in “Repentance.” In later poems she would more freely fuse Mormon-inspired questions about faith and the proper relation of the individual to deity with her own pagan inclinations. For example, her 1963 poem “Gods | Children” exemplifies the older poet’s practice by incorporating the Mormon view that mortal life forms a stage in a spirit’s journey to godhood while at the same time unsettling the boundaries that distinguish gods from children. Thus, Swenson illuminates a fundamental religious conundrum: that spiritual advance is the realization of latent potential, of constantly discovering that which was there from the beginning, of paradoxically progressing into childhood. The poem opens by stating of humans that “[t]hey are born naked” and “are children until they die,” at which time Christianity tells them they “‘are God’s children,’” provoking the speaker to ruminate over the semantic implications of the statement, “Are gods . . . children,” and finally concluding with the startling question: “Are *gods children?*” (164). The most obviously pagan aspects of this poem surface through Swenson’s retelling of human history that describes the pre-Christian past as a time when humans understood “sex” as “a red coal in the groin, / they worshiped” (165). In 1933, though, the younger Swenson was not yet ready to question spiritual progress or openly acknowledge worship of the “groin.” She was, however, willing to approach the verge of doing so. When her speaker in “Repentance” first repeats the clause, “there was the day,” Swenson ends the line with a blank: ____ (l. 10). The mere contemplation of the word that might fill that blank appears to have been enough to trigger a shift in the wind, chill the speaker’s yearning, and make her “Christian again” (line 17).

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