

Rebirth and the Spiritual Frontier in the Poetry of May Swenson

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In a letter May Swenson wrote to Elizabeth Bishop on October 23, 1951, Swenson described her sudden composition of a poem as “a kind of revelation” and told Bishop, “now I know just how Joseph Smith felt when the angel showed him the Golden Plates.” Swenson’s strong identification with Smith and her association of his revelation with her own provides a powerful imaginative link that helps illuminate the extent to which Swenson’s approach to poetry was influenced by the Mormon culture in which she was reared. As her comment above implies, Swenson understood on some level that Mormonism had an influence on her development as a poet, yet much of that influence remained unconscious, providing primary assumptions about the nature of human experience rather than dictating subject matter or social views. One sees this influence most clearly through Swenson’s insistence on pushing the limits of received knowledge and thus situating her poems in what might be thought of as a frontier of mind and spirit that she knowingly linked to both the Mormon pioneer past and the experiences of her parents. This metaphoric frontier grows out of Swenson’s early exposure to Mormon cosmology, particularly the doctrine of progression that presents the spirit’s passage through multiple

worlds as part of advancement to godhood. Swenson's particular path in negotiating multiple and varied metaphoric frontiers also betrays her appropriation of the Mormon concept of personal agency granted humanity in the Garden of Eden. For Swenson, Eve's words in the Pearl of Great Price may well have suggested a degree of female spiritual authority at odds with orthodox Mormon doctrine at the same time that Swenson's impulse to take Eve seriously defines her as a daughter of the faith. As a writer poised on the frontier, where tradition confronts pure potential, Swenson may also be understood as embodying the doctrine of direct revelation, that core component of Mormon belief best exemplified by Joseph Smith that presents sacred knowledge as perpetually unfolding and never ultimately confined by the proclamations of past prophets.

One of the clearest indications that Swenson viewed her life as an extension of her parents' culture appears in a now famous letter Swenson wrote to her father, Dan Arthur Swenson, on May 29, 1951, after she had been living in New York City for fifteen years. What seems particularly important in this letter is Swenson's conviction that her move east from Utah reflects the same impulse that drew her parents to Mormonism and led them west to Utah, departing their native Sweden in quest of a new life:

I want to point to the fact that this seeming separation, or opposition, is actually not the case—that, in fact, it proves my likeness to you and mother and my comparison with you (at least psychologically)—for just as you and mother were not content with inherited knowledge and belief, with the traditional way of life of your parents and ancestors and felt the need to find a new faith and even a new land for yourselves, I had this same impulse. It is a healthy impulse—it is really the evolutionary impulse itself at its root, which accounts for all progress.

With these words, Swenson equated her move east with her parents' move west in an effort to demonstrate that, despite appearances to the contrary, she had acted as they had, which was to pursue that most

American of all impulses: the desire for personal liberty and freedom of belief achieved by passing beyond the predictable boundaries of settled tradition. In making this statement, Swenson treated the West as Henry David Thoreau had in his 1862 essay "Walking," where he describes the impulse of all Americans to travel westward and then states, "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild" (2167), or that untamed zone which the frontier separates from civilization. This of course means that Swenson could share her parent's experience of going west, even though she had chosen to move east. Both Swenson and Thoreau lived in a metaphoric West that performs as the physical frontier Frederick Jackson Turner associated with social rebirth when he wrote in 1893 that "American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier" (2). All this is to say that literary and historical precedent supports Swenson's assertion that she was not only following in her parent's footsteps, but that she was enacting in her own life the striving for expanded personal freedoms that is central to the development of American character in general and Mormon pioneer settlement in particular.

Swenson's use of the word "progress," when she stated that the impulse she shared with her father "accounts for all progress," was probably not coincidental. It is hard to believe that a woman reared in the Mormon Church would use the term without considering its implications within Mormon culture, especially if she were interested in narrowing the gap between her own life and that of her Mormon parents. As Jan Shipps has made clear, the concept of progress was crucial to Mormon cosmology: "the ultimate goal of the Latter-day Saints is not eternity somehow spent in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in heaven. Mormonism holds up a different goal: 'eternal progression' toward godhood" (149). The Doctrine and Covenants enunciates this concept by revealing that those who abide by the Lord's covenant shall never cease to progress: "Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject to them" (132:20). Writing specifically of this aspect of Swenson's work, Susan Howe looks at the final lines of the poem "Flying Home

From Utah” as a reflection of Mormon belief. Howe connects Swenson’s words, “Perpetual worlds / within, upon, above the world, the world / a leaf within a wilderness of worlds” (177), with a passage from the Pearl of Great Price “in which God speaks to Moses” (152):

And worlds without number have I created. . . . For behold, there are many worlds that have passed away by the word of my power. And there are many that now stand, and innumerable are they unto man; but all things are numbered unto me, for they are mine and I know them. (Moses 1:33, 35)

Given this scriptural and doctrinal context, Swenson may be interpreted as deliberately infusing her words to her father with spiritual significance designed to show that even if her path differed from his, her motivation derived from core beliefs promoted by the faith in which he reared her.

Examples of this cosmological orientation are multiple and abundantly visible in many Swenson poems that present experience as passing through multiple worlds. The poem “The Crossing,” for example, does this by taking the reader into the world inhabited by a hawk that crosses above the speaker, drawing her imagination with it until she crosses from her world into the hawk’s. After having first established that the world of the hawk is a world she already shares by virtue of breathing the same air, the speaker gathers momentum for her crossing to the world of the hawk, the deer, and even the mountain by similarly identifying evidence that water and earth already link their experience to hers. Doing so enables Swenson to expose the artificiality of perceived boundaries, as if her speaker has to nudge her intellect beyond adherence to culturally constructed boundaries that impede the impulse to spiritual union. In the poem’s closing lines the speaker appears to apprehend the fabricated function of “distance” that for a moment “could not flee or hide,” as if exposed and vulnerable (17). The succeeding transport into the world of nature that human culture deems “Other” signals the speaker’s embrace of the Other in herself.

“The Poplar’s Shadow” is one of Swenson’s poems that conveys her awareness of this passage into and through worlds, because it presents transport as central to the work of the poet. Early in the poem, the speaker establishes that the subject is her call to poetry when she describes the poplar’s shadow as “the quill of a great pen” that fell “dark upon the lawn / where I used to play” (32). The poem concludes with the speaker’s recalling the poplar’s shadow of her childhood when, as an adult in New York, she views a pigeon’s feather, bringing together her past and her present as two distinct worlds that increase her receptivity of worlds to come. Swenson’s metaphoric conjoining of wing and quill, nature and writing, presents poetry as both an extension of the natural world and an expression of the creative process that directs the course of nature. Once the poet’s hand holds the quill, it too becomes a wing, metonymically enacting on the page the world unfolding the power of the “enormous wing” that defines poetic wonder as the endless anticipation of progress (33). In her essay “The Poet as Antispecialist,” Swenson describes this aspect of the poet’s quest as “a craving to get through the curtains of things as they *appear*, to things as they *are*, and then into the larger, wilder space as they *are becoming*” (16).

As her interest in progress implies, particularly when seen through her close focus on moments of transition, Swenson was deeply invested in poetry’s function as an expression of the growth process itself.¹ She could be very humorous in her approach to this process, but a high seriousness always accompanies her work, indicating that she was not in it for herself alone. The poem “White Mood” illuminates this dimension of her writing by showing that even the most intensely private and incommunicative recess of the poet’s experience, the nightmare space of writer’s block, can be a domain of strange beauty willingly inhabited in the search for words that she undertakes at least in part for others. “Tonight,” the poem begins, “within my brain no bell / only the snowing / of my thoughts” (14). Here, Swenson performs the impossible by writing a poem about not being able to write a poem, a defiance of logic she surely delights in, but her aim is neither play alone nor pro-

¹Elsewhere, I specifically address Swenson’s engagement with the natural

viding an inventory of the isolated interior self. In this most private place, the poem tells the reader, are a bell and a church. "But no word is born," the speaker confesses in the final stanza; "no bell swings / in the steeple / of my brain." What is the poet's body, then, if not a church where the search for words aims to ring the brain's bell for others?

This broader, public, and spiritual dimension of Swenson's poetic vocation is expressed as clearly in her poem "Teleology" as anywhere in her work. Drawing her title from a term with deep theological roots, Swenson explicitly addresses the purposes and proper ends of life. In this instance her abiding concern with progress is clearly linked to humanity's participation in the evolutionary advance of the natural world, suggesting that transport to future worlds is what humans were designed to achieve. In a few short lines, Swenson intertwines her poetic debt to Homer's Cyclops, her western knowledge of the hunter and his blind, and her Mormon dedication to the present's participation in the future. As described in the Pearl of Great Price, human life forms part of a passage into new worlds made possible through the sacrament of baptism, so that movement from one world to another becomes associated with rebirth and spiritual attainment: "even so ye must be born again into the kingdom of heaven, of water, and of the Spirit . . . that ye might be sanctified from all sin, and enjoy the words of eternal life in this world, and eternal life in the world to come, even immortal glory" (Moses 6:59). As these poems indicate, Swenson incorporates features of baptism in many of her poems by structuring them around personal transformation, anticipation, and rebirth, all crucial elements of Mormon theology.

Baptism becomes the central focus of Swenson's poem "My Name Was Called," where she establishes that for her, rebirth can take place on this earth, and that new worlds can be entered through the art of the poet. As in "The Poplar's Shadow," Swenson brings together past and present, this time her baptism in a white gown at age eight and her reception of an honorary doctorate in a black robe at age seventy-five. Writing specifically of Swenson poems like this one, Roberta Stearman notes that even though Swenson "became estranged from

her Mormon background and the beliefs of her childhood and girlhood, the experiences of these years were never far from her memory, for they recur in her work; they are a catalyst to her poetry” (15). Swenson’s poetic incorporation of the past is particularly pronounced in “My Name Was Called” where a seminal childhood experience informs the imaginative life of the older poet. The language here reveals how steadfastly Swenson expresses the frontier experience of facing the unknown, the discomfort and even anxiety of not being entirely in control, of both welcoming and dreading entry into the wild. The poem’s opening line, “I didn’t know what would be done with me,” sets a tone of anxious anticipation. At midpoint in the poem, the older speaker recalls the rising out of water that she experienced in childhood, investing that moment with all the qualities of a rude emergence from the womb: “My name is called. Pulled up, / out of the deafening bubbles, boosted up / to sit in the white chair” (53). She closes the poem with these lines: “I didn’t know what would be / done, in the white dress or in the black, / when my name was called” (54). Here is the same sense of surprise, the same ageless, timeless awe that once more initiates entry into a new realm of experience.

Perhaps more than any other feature of Mormon thought, Swenson adopts the concept of free agency that the Lord tells Moses he conferred on humanity in the Garden of Eden (Moses 7:32). Thanks to this gift, the spirit is granted the means of ascending to godhood. As the Doctrine and Covenants states, those who abide by the new covenants in this life will enjoy the promises of those covenants in the life to come:

it shall be done unto them in all things whatsoever my servant hath put upon them, in time, and through all eternity; and shall be of full force when they are out of the world; and they shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to their exaltation and glory in all things, as hath been sealed upon their heads, which glory shall be a fullness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever.

Then shall they be gods, because they have no end. (132: 19-20)

In a passage from the Pearl of Great Price that Swenson would have read with great interest, Eve describes the expulsion from Eden as a positive event precisely because it makes baptism necessary and enables the process of rebirth that invests the devout with the seed of godhood: “Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient” (Moses 5:11). In her poem “The Process,” Swenson insists on the centrality of free agency as part of a creative process that she invites others to enter with her. The speaker begins by requesting that the reader assume a fetal position: “Lie down on your side, / and fold your knees / Bend your hands at the wrist / against your chest / as a cat or dog does in repose” (168). “Now wait for what will happen,” she patiently admonishes us, “Something will.” What happens next is an awakening of the imagination that links the self to the birth of spinning worlds: “Wide and clear the eyelid’s dome / a galaxy where suns collide / and planets spin and moons begin.” Again, one sees the expectation of new worlds deliberately entered through rebirth in art achieved through the poet’s exercise of free will.

Of all her poems in which Swenson models the exercise of free agency, none is more startling in its scriptural and doctrinal implications than “The Seed of My Father.” Set in a garden like the one Swenson’s father planted each year, the poem is richly autobiographical while also reading like a revision of the Garden of Eden story,² except that in this instance the speaker, who assumes the roles of both Adam and Eve, receives her father’s seed directly. As a revision of the biblical story, “The Seed of My Father” is most stunning in its elevation of the female speaker so that she is invested with the power to reproduce what the Bible and the Pearl of Great Price confer on the union of Adam and Eve. As a poet, the speaker declares that her po-

²Swenson’s brother Paul observes that his father’s garden contained “hives where [he] kept bees, the thick tangle of raspberry bushes, the hollyhocks, the wild patches of chamomile, and the orchard of fruit trees in the back lot”

etic creations perpetuate the seed of her father, thus confirming the power of poetry to trigger rebirth and entry into new worlds of experience. Poems like this one reinforce Gudrun Grabher's observation that Swenson's "poetry, obviously, was her religion" (82).

As a writer of Mormon descent, Swenson can be interpreted as deliberately challenging the patriarchal hierarchy of the Church by asserting that females also possess the power to bear their father's seed. Yet her manner of issuing this challenge is distinctly Mormon in its correspondence with scripture, its exercise of free agency, its insistence on rebirth, its dedication to progression, and its understanding of the self as a vehicle for ongoing revelation. Howe has it right when she writes that "Swenson handles the Mormon past with respect and affection and looks with a more critical eye at the contemporary Mormon world" (142). The American frontier, the Mormon frontier, the spiritual frontier of her parents, and the religious frontier of Joseph Smith all form the scene of Swenson's writing. With her gaze trained steadfastly westward, she writes purely of promise, and her manner of embodying that promise is Mormon.

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I Find the Messiah

on the carpet, in my daughter's sour blossoms of vomit
that I scrub with a shredded rag

inside the jammed printer, in the delicate cuts