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Body My House

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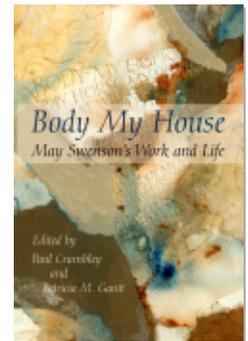
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INTRODUCTION

Patricia M. Gantt

The life, work, and literary reputation of poet May Swenson (1913–1989) are firmly grounded in Utah’s cultural and actual soil. A deep connection exists between Swenson and the town of Logan, Utah, where she was born and reared—a connection that is apparent from her earliest poems, published in high school and university periodicals, to her more mature writing, to her request to be buried on the campus of her alma mater, Utah State University. Although Swenson spent the majority of her adult life away from her native state, she frequently returned to it for literary inspiration, whether writing about her beloved parents, the plant and animal life she observed in the area, or her deeply felt emotions. Her boundless imagination ironically led her both to Utah and away from it, as she sought a creative terrain where she might “become naked in poetry, / [and] force the truth / through a poem” (*Nature* 12). It is only fitting that the first collection of critical essays on Swenson and her literary universe should have its inception at her university and its press.

This collection stems from a desire to instigate a deliberate academic conversation about a poet who produced eleven books of poetry and received almost every major poetry award in the United States. Much of that initial conversation took place at a three-day symposium held at Utah State in June 2004. The May Swenson Symposium was unique in that it not only brought together scholars and poets from around the world but also included contributions from members of Swenson’s family and representatives from publishing and archives. It also connected graduate and undergraduate students who were new to Swenson’s poetry and interested community members who simply wanted to know more about a writer often spoken of as a “poet’s poet.”

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Discussions during the symposium centered on the range of Swenson's literary corpus and the scholarly approaches to it. Sessions particularly focused on her work as a nature writer; the literary and social contexts for her writing; her national and international acclaim, including her work as a translator; her associations with other poets and writers; her creative process; and her profound explorations of issues of gender and sexuality. The book you hold in your hands, however, is much more than a volume of proceedings from that symposium. Although it does contain concepts from presentations given there, it also includes ideas expanded beyond the conference format, as well as further critical work emerging for the first time.

"Body My House": May Swenson's Work and Life is the product of an ongoing, international fascination with the poetic achievement of one of America's most skillful and compelling writers. It includes references to a wide range of Swenson manuscripts—published and unpublished poems, letters, diaries, and additional prose—some of which has not been available before.

Essays in this collection are grouped sequentially, without formal divisions, in three sets: those drawn from Swenson's life by people who knew her very well, both as person and poet; those that connect Swenson's work with that of other poets like Walt Whitman and Elizabeth Bishop; and those that investigate the poetics evident in Swenson's writing. As editors, we hope that the conversation about Swenson's poems begun here will be a useful, dynamic one that will grow to explore even more of her writing.

The first two essays, "The Love Poems and Letters of May Swenson" and "A Figure in the Tapestry: The Poet's Feeling Runs Ahead of Her Imagination (Greenwich Village, 1949–50)," are analyses by R. R. Knudson, Swenson's partner and literary executor, and Paul Swenson, the poet's brother. Knudson refers to May Swenson as one of many poets she "dote[s] on" and investigates Swenson's writing about her numerous loves, from the "powerful . . . and protective force" of her parents' love, to an appreciation for "a deep blue shock of shade" observed one afternoon. Knudson celebrates what she calls Swenson's "own authentic voice, her instinctual feelings, her keenness of perception, her amazing variety of subjects, her cosmos both accessible and elusive." Paul Swenson draws his analysis from an unpublished 1949 diary his sister kept, calling its lines representative of her poetry in "their honesty, self-irony, and clear-eyed evaluation of her personal and professional circumstances." The subject of much of the diary is the relationship between May Swenson and Pearl

Schwartz, one marked by an intensity expressed in unambiguous sensual terms, a love that fueled their almost two decades together.

The next group of essays begins with a chapter by Alicia Ostriker, one of three major American poets and critics whose work is included in this volume. Ostriker points to a systemic link between Swenson and Walt Whitman, whose particular definition of liberty—"absence of constraint"—she believes the poets share:

[I]n Swenson as in Whitman we have a poet of democratic vision and vista, a poet of inclusiveness not exclusiveness, for whom all natural phenomena are equally eligible for celebration and all levels and layers of language are equally delectable, a poet who is always surprising, who is not *literary*, not *fashionable*, who belongs to no school . . . and doesn't need to show off how learned she is, or to condescend, or to be superior, or on the other hand to polemicize—a poet as fresh as fresh milk and as sound as an egg.

As her title "May Swenson: Whitman's Daughter" suggests, Ostriker explores the "corollary of eroticism" found in both poets' work, particularly in the complexities contained in Swenson's commingling of nature and human passion.

Kirstin Hotelling Zona's "May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop" investigates the connection between the two poets, whose professional relationship began at Yaddo in 1950 and continued until Bishop's death in 1979. The relationship resulted in close to three hundred letters and is the subject of *Dear Elizabeth: Five Poems & Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop*, to which Zona contributed an afterword. Drawing primarily on letters exchanged between Swenson and Bishop, Zona focuses on the poets' important gifts of perceptivity, the "slides . . . from honesty to . . . beneath-the-surface subtlety" that the two exhibit in their writing, whether in poetry or prose. Like Ostriker, Zona concerns herself with tracing Swenson's influences but is more interested in exploring what she calls the "palpable caginess" of Swenson's implicitly sexual lines.

In "De-Cartesianizing the Universe: May Swenson's Design of Wor(l)ds," Gudrun M. Grabher extends the realm of exploration of Swenson's poetry to articulate a Swensonian "epistemological approach to the universe." Positing that poetry, rather than Mormonism, became Swenson's true religion, Grabher considers Swenson's poems to be prayers—almost godlike efforts "to create, to constitute, to call into being." Analyzing Swenson work across several decades, Grabher interprets Swenson's

numerous attempts to attain a reality that is “not something static but dynamic and organic.” Grabher is also interested in Swenson’s use of the physical page, her frequent splits between words and stanzas forming a threaded bridge between the world as seen and the world as necessarily unattainable mystery, “between I and you, I and the universe.”

The final half-dozen chapters deal explicitly with Swenson’s poetics—her demonstrable art of creation. Martha Nell Smith’s “‘That Never Told CAN Be’: May Swenson’s Manuscript Witnesses” investigates what she has learned from the poet’s commentary on her poetry, as well as from the poems themselves. In both, Smith finds what she identifies as a “powerful testament . . . to [Swenson’s] commitment to the truth.” She concentrates on “That Never Told Can Be,” a poem whose title comes from a line by William Blake, noting Swenson’s fascination with Blake’s work as a natural connection between poets who were “keen observer[s]” and whose “astonishing lyrics are deceptively simple.” Smith argues that for Swenson writing is never merely a means of capturing a particular subject but also a struggle to capture language itself.

Like Smith, poet and critic Cynthia Hogue explores Swenson’s selection of lines—even actual words—that allow her to alter what is “hidden in plain sight,” her sexuality. Viewing “lesbian (in)visibility” as “a problem as well as a choice,” Hogue analyzes Swenson’s poetry, including the often anthologized “The Centaur,” as a means of “altering the inherited standard of vision,” a playful re-visioning of “hybrid identity” that “anticipates postmodern reconfigurations of agency and [liberates] new subjectivities.” Hogue further asserts that in poems like “The Cross Spider” and “Shuttles,” Swenson employs “wit to serious purpose, countering assumptions that linguistic play is all surface-dazzle with no depth,” asking her audience to challenge its own cultural assumptions about progress, sexuality, and mortality. Hogue concludes that Swenson’s poetry, though highly evocative and provoking, is less about how we imagine ideas than about the use of language.

Paul Crumbley’s “May Swenson and Other Animals: Her Poetics of Natural Selection” finds its source in the poet’s frequent writings about animals, especially those poems in which she configures the speakers as “fellow members of an ever-evolving natural world.” Swenson’s poetic self-image, according to Crumbley, defies stasis but becomes increasingly edgy and animalistic in the sense of freedom and openness, as it reveals Swenson’s own expressed duality as person and animal. Treating a range of Swenson poems across the decades, Crumbley shows us a writer daring to communicate “her loving embrace of the animal in herself” in a further deliberate attack on “conceptual barriers of all sorts.”

Michael Spooner brings multiple perspectives to Swenson studies in “How Everything Happens: Notes on May Swenson’s Theory of Writing.” Spooner is the director of the Utah State University Press, which yearly confers the May Swenson Prize on an outstanding book of poems by an emerging author; in addition, he is a writer himself and a close follower of Swenson’s work. As Spooner affirms, Swenson had no desire to be considered a writing theorist, yet her composing process is evident in a variety of materials she has left behind—recordings of the poet reading her work, a line drawing in which she depicts herself as circles and squares, numerous interviews and letters, and of course her poems. Through what both Swenson and Spooner term iconographic poetry, Swenson reveals a “confident modernism,” as well as a decidedly avant-garde wish to present both received and achieved wisdom by “loosening the hold of syntax on the word.” Spooner notes the clean precision present in her language: “She sharpens our perception of the nonphysical by bringing the physical so sharply to our senses—in her own terms.”

Suzanne Juhasz’s “The Queer Poetics of May Swenson” challenges the reader to embrace Swenson’s “unconventional representations of gender, sexuality, and desire”; rejecting derogatory notions of *queer*, Juhasz recasts the word “as a tool to question and disarrange normative systems of behavior and identity in our culture.” This is the “queering” she sees in Swenson’s poetry—expressions of fluidity and change rather than sterile depictions of gender roles such as male as active and female as passive. Concerned most with those poems that explore identity formation, Juhasz treats Swenson’s nature poems and love poems and looks with a keen eye at metaphors that blur normative distinctions and ask us to think in fresh ways.

Mark Doty’s concluding chapter, “‘Question’ and More Questions: Two Shells for May Swenson,” shows both the poet and the critic at work. Taking the southern barrier island where he is presently living as a starting point for his investigation of Swenson’s poetry, Doty crafts a lyrical depiction of a shell: “The whole thing resembles some strange Victorian hatpin, or a Viennese art nouveau tree, or what would have resulted if Rodin had sculpted Loie Fuller dancing in her veils.” Doty’s desire to attend to each detail of the shell leads him to a consideration of Swenson’s “Question,” with its image of the body as house, horse, and dog. He looks at each of these intriguing metaphors, giving no answer but asking a series of questions about Swenson’s “deep question fueling the poem,” namely: “If the self is something housed in the body, clothed by it, what will it mean for us to be free of such disguise and restraint?” Moving on to “Little

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Lion Face,” Doty delves into Swenson’s poetic investiture of pure Eros in the dandelion, which becomes her metaphor for human sensuality.

In “The Wonderful Pen,” May Swenson invites her poetic audience to “Read me. Read my mind.” As editors, we hope that this volume will lead our readers not only to a greater understanding of Swenson’s poetry and poetics, but to a reading—or rereading—of the poems themselves. Her work is ripe for further discovery. This volume provides only an introduction to the multifaceted literary life of an important twentieth-century American woman and writer whose work is now beginning to attract the significant scholarly attention that has long been its due.