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## Body My House

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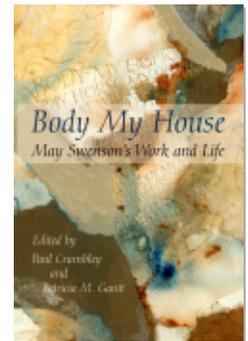
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DE-CARTESIANIZING  
THE UNIVERSE  
May Swenson's Design of Wor(1)ds

*Gudrun M. Grabher*

MY POEMS

*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.*

May Swenson, April 4, 1962

May Swenson's 1962 poem serves as an introduction to both what this essay will *not* deal with when looking at her poetry and what it *will* focus on. The poem illustrates the poet's scientific interests, especially in space and space shuttles, landing on the moon, traveling through space, and transcending the gravitational field. "Space exploration fascinates Swenson," writes Rosemary Johnson (520), and R. R. Knudson and Suzanne Bigelow go into even more detail: "she religiously followed newspaper and TV accounts of America's space program, and in 1984 she watched a

launching of the space shuttle" (103). May Swenson confirmed her interest in science and the space program in the "Craft Interview": "Science comes into my poetry quite a lot. The space program, the astronauts' experiences fascinate me" (Swenson 22). This, however, will *not* be the emphasis here, except implicitly, in regard to her epistemological approach to the universe.

Literary critics and friends of Swenson have repeatedly observed that she left behind her Mormon upbringing and developed a "religion" of her own. May wrote to her friends at college: "It's not for me—religion. It seems like a redundancy for a poet" (qtd. in Knudson and Bigelow 34). "Prayers" and "god" might thus seem to be inconspicuous images to start with; however, they are significant in the larger context of her understanding of writing poetry in relation to the world. Her poetry, obviously, was her religion. "Swenson searches heaven and earth for a vantage point. The problem is, none exists. The meanings of God's heavens have long since spilt out into the Einsteinian universe" (R. Johnson 520). Thus, she needs to recreate the world and the universe. And her approach is neither that of the scientist nor of the philosopher, but of the poet. As Jascha Kessler puts it, "[The] poet's task comes before either scientist or philosopher, for it describes the things that take place, and even, to speak more truly, puts them there for us, on the page..." (522). And the poet's means to put the world there for us, more truly, is language, the "productive, performative power of language," as Kirstin Zona has often stated. May Swenson "leaps to the love of language and has a ball," as Karl Shapiro poignantly puts it (392).

At first glance this poem might strike one as simple, but it is not. It achieves its intricacy through the ambiguities created by enjambment. As the etymological root of the word "prayer" suggests, Swenson sees her poems as an act of "asking, begging, and requesting" (Klein). Another etymological dictionary adds an important word, "earnestly": to pray is "to entreat, to ask earnestly" (Skeat). With that in mind, we may drop any suspicion that the poet might be using irony here. In connection with the other meanings, *ask* is most likely to be interpreted in the sense of *asking for*. However, the meaning of *questioning* is thus also implied, though subtly. The 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. 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. Grace Schulman points to the “incantatory rhythms” of Swenson’s poetry (11): “In the beginning was the word,” she seems to agree with the Bible, but the word was *not* God.

Swenson proposed, “My theory: That the universe began to exist at the point when human language was born. That it began simultaneously with its expression through thought and word—through recognition & naming & defining & relating. ‘In the beginning was the word...’” (qtd. in Zona, *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop & May Swenson* 127). The word asks a god to come into being. The ambiguity, even the paradoxical contradiction, is not solvable. She addresses a god, but so as to call him into being. This almost equals the poem’s creation or invention of god yet at the same time leaves the possibility open that in some form he is already there, somewhere out in space. She thus manages to leave her statement indeterminate, this indeterminacy being highly reminiscent of Emily Dickinson, a poet whom, as is well known, she strongly admired. The god she has evoked is both inside the mind of his creator and outside her mind, haunting space.

This god, whom her poems may have created or called closer from out of space to the realm of human beings, is then, in the following two stanzas, situated in space though simultaneously anthropomorphized by means of the hair and the heel. The fact that she says “I have seen,” however, renders his existence independent of and outside of herself. However, we know that “seeing” for Swenson is at times almost identical with creating. Again, she thus poses an ambiguity that leaves us puzzled. But even though this god of hers is attributed human characteristics, she wants him to be more manifest. After all, his hair and his heel have dissolved in the ungraspable ethereal bodies of the sun and the moon. However, his manifestation, which she prays for in the fourth stanza, is hardly less abstract. But “lightning” evokes the notion of light, which again links up not only with “flash” and “clear” but also with “seeing”: “One comes to feel that nothing is lost that is visible, that there is nothing the poet’s eye cannot see and describe. But May Swenson is a poet of light, not shadow. . . . her eye is caught by surfaces, contours, textures” (Howes 521). Also, “lightning” prepares for the “pure instant” of the last stanza. Lightning also happens in one pure instant.

“Reflecting poetically,” as remarks Richard Bernstein, “on the relation between observation and intellect, vision and thought, Miss Swenson in 1963 closed a poem entitled ‘Cabala’ this way”:

Eye light and mind light,  
lightning taming leather  
I will turn, and be  
a swiftness on the dark.  
(331)

But in the end it is clearly her poems that “abolish” and immediately “recreate” the world, as these words grammatically belong to “My Poems”: poems that pray, abolish, and recreate. “I want to *build* a poem with language as the material,” said Swenson in an interview with Karla Hammond (“An Interview with May Swenson: July 14, 1978” 65). It is this creation of the world through the words of her poems and her visions that will be the focus of the following argument.

May Swenson’s cosmic and anthropological approaches to the world and the universe start not only with scientific investigations but often also with various philosophical reflections. In her poem “The Universe” from the collection *To Mix With Time*, she clearly plays around with Descartes’ principle of the *cogito, ergo sum*. “There is a compelling reverse spin on Cartesianism in many of Swenson’s finest lyrics,” remarks Edward Hirsch. “Instead of Descartes’ *cogito*, we get a plaintive call to the beloved” (336). She modifies this well-known epistemological conception that has largely determined the Western epistemological approach to the world since the early seventeenth century by both distancing herself from an exaggerated anthropocentric position and by focusing on the human being and his/her position within the larger, cosmic context. “[She] avoids seeing things from the human point of view. From choice she peers out at the world through the eyes of the things under scrutiny” (R. Johnson 521). This modification, I would argue, attempts at healing the split between *subject/human being* and *object/world* that Descartes caused and left to us as a painful heritage, forever unbridgeable. Richard Wilbur, in his foreword to Knudson and Bigelow’s biography of Swenson, speaks of May’s “passionate wish to cancel the distinction between subject and object, and to be at one with the portion of reality described” (5). May Swenson makes this split visible, provocative and gaping as it is, and offers her verbal stitches to mend and fix together what should never have been separated. Language, the senses, rational analysis, and emotional reactions link the human being to his/her surrounding, as the poet demonstrates. The visual design of her poems—and she insists “that the poem function visually” (Birkerts 212) “to have simultaneity as well as sequence” (Swenson, “A Note about *Iconographs*” 86)—helps her to display this wound as well as

to offer ways and means of healing it through the interaction between wo/man and the universe.

Thus, she truly re-creates the world like an architect constructing bridges over the gaps. She maps the universe according to her own philosophy: "Poetry is used to make maps of that globe, which to the 'naked eye' appears disklike and one-dimensional.... It then enlarges and reveals its surprising topography, becomes a world" (Swenson, "The Experience of Poetry in a Scientific Age," qtd. in Zona, "A 'Dangerous Game of Change'" 231). And one may add Hirsch's comment that "her shaped verses, designed spacing and quasi-mathematical forms are love letters to Creation itself, and she continually invests the physical world (and the verbal world) with Eros, celebrating its mysteries..." (336).

I neither agree with Richard Moore, who says that this poem "is no explanation at all, but a comedy of unanswered questions echoing one another like a cat chasing its tail" (390), nor with Sue Russell, who suggests that "Swenson is a child here in Blake's sense of wonderment before the infinite" (137). The questions raised are not meant to be answered, nor are they evoked for any comic effect. Rather, these questions shake the unshakable by effecting a shifting of points of view. Wonderment is then provoked in the reader rather than being a mere expression of the poet.

For Swenson, the "visual pattern suggesting a puzzle and puzzled mind seeking an answer" (Gould 316) are meant to puzzle the reader and make him/her rethink the notions by which he/she has designed the world. Grace Schulman has rightly observed, "Questions are the wellspring of May Swenson's art" (9). The central word, visually and semantically, in this poem is the preposition "about." It occurs eight times. It runs through the whole poem from top to bottom and is placed in the center of the lines that are arranged irregularly, so that we can read it downward in a vertical, almost straight line. And it is this word that functions as a bridge between "we" and the "universe." The second-most frequently used word is "think," occurring six times in six consecutive lines in the same place. The same placement is true of the word "universe" (occurring five times) and the word "because" (occurring three times). "Lines and spaces are carefully arranged in patterns appropriate to the subject. Some words are given typographical emphasis by being set off and repeated" (Stanford 68). For all of these words one can draw a vertical line. Even though Swenson uses and repeats the phrase "we think" five times, she clearly alludes to Descartes' "I think." The use of the first-person personal pronoun in the plural, however, marks a first step toward escaping the philosopher's trap. Descartes, by means of his principle, had isolated the single, individual

THE UNIVERSE

What  
is it about,  
the universe  
about  
us stretching out? We within our brains within it think  
we must unspin the laws that spin it. We think  
*why* because we think  
*because.*  
Because we think  
we think  
the universe  
about  
us.  
But does it think,  
the universe?  
Then what  
about?  
About  
us? If not, must there be cause  
in the universe?  
Must it have laws? And what  
if the universe  
is *not about*  
us? Then what?  
What  
is it about  
and what  
about  
us?

(To Mix With Time 3)

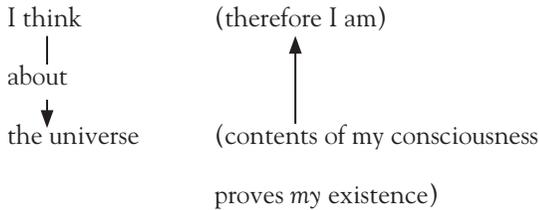
self from the rest of the world, both human and object. Having doubted everything, he had come up with the one and only certainty, namely that I who doubt must necessarily and inevitably exist. On the way to his insight, however, he had cancelled out everything. What he was left with, ultimately, was the singular *I*, which was now in need of reintroducing the world and other human beings. In this, however, Descartes failed. Be it object or other human being, they are, within the philosopher's argued universe, forever constituted by the *I* and thus deprived of an existence independent of that *I*. Whatever *I* think about is merely the contents of my consciousness and therefore proves my own existence but never that of which I think about. The separation between *I* and *other* is doomed to yearn for unification. By saying "*we* think" the poet has already unified human beings, transcending the solipsism of the *I* into a community of us all, us human beings. Of course, Swenson simply postulates the *we* rather than establishing a proof of its existence along philosophical lines.

The next step she takes in questioning the philosopher is to raise the question of whether the universe *thinks* as well. The philosopher attributed the capacity to think to the human being only. "But does it think, / the universe?" is the poet's legitimate question. Not only legitimate but central, as it seems, because she has placed "But does it think" right in the middle of the poem, in the sixteenth of thirty-one lines of verse. One could even argue that she has reduced the human *I* to a small letter *i* and integrated it into the *it*, the universe. (Swenson, as we know, frequently abolishes the capital *I* of the first-person singular personal pronoun as e. e. cummings did, which might be interpreted as a visual sign of diminishing the anthropocentric view. "She has in her typographical and syntactical ingenuity recalled, and often surpassed, e. e. cummings" [Salter 402]). She is thus turning the perspectives around. It is no longer we who think, but the universe that thinks. "Writing the poem from an unusual center point is one means by which May Swenson adds heretofore unseen qualities to objects. Sometimes the result is a new sense of the order of material in space or time" (Stanford 60).

If the universe thinks, Swenson wonders, does it think about us? In either direction, it is verbally the *about* which connects *universe* and *we*. Again, the etymological roots of the word—here, the preposition *about*—support further analysis. It is interesting to note that Swenson does not use "of" when speaking about "thinking." She might as well have said: "we think of." However, the word "about" is more intricate in its implications. Deriving from the Old English *abutan*, it contains the prefix *a* for on as well as *butan*, which "is itself a compound of *be*, *by*, and *utan*, outward.

Thus the word is resolved into *on-be-utan*: on (that which is) by (the) outside" (Skeat). Its meaning is thus "on the outside of" (Partridge) as well as "around, concerning" (Skeat). In its various meanings, this preposition serves Swenson very well to evoke a swirl of thoughts and thinking, whose center is eventually hard to identify.

From the Cartesian point of view of "I think, therefore I am," any thoughts about the universe make the universe the object of the *I*'s thinking. This might be visualized as follows:



This linear argument is turned into a circular one by Swenson. Thinking is no longer regarded as the exclusive attribute that characterizes the human being. *It*, the universe, might think as well. As argued above, the human *I* is thus integrated into the universe, which is also stated right at the beginning, the "universe / about / us stretching out?" as *about* is here used in the sense of *around*. Of course, we are surrounded, encompassed, by the universe, almost disappearing in its immensity, our importance diminished to a small *i*. However, she starts out the poem using the word *about* in a more abstract sense: "What / is it about, / the universe," implying the question of the meaning of the universe.

The answer to this question is approached, from the human perspective, from the angle of causality. The *why-because* strategy of interrogation is what marks the way "we think." Here again the use of the enjambment is highly effective: "We think / *why* because / we think / because." Split up into its various units, this sentence emphasizes several aspects: first, the basic principle of causality: "We think / *why* because" describes the pattern of causal thinking. Then she goes a step further, adding, "We think / *why* because / we think." *Why*, she seems to suggest, is the first word we come up with as a result of the fact that we think. As soon as we think *why*, however, we also think *because*, always desiring an answer. The one implies the other. Visually, the phrase *we think* is here parenthesized by the word *because* before and after it. Having thus established the basic pattern of thinking—the *why-because* line—she then paraphrases the philosopher, saying that because we think (by means of thinking) we introduce

the universe. “we think / the universe / about / us” thus becomes equivalent to saying our thinking constitutes the universe. Simultaneously, it suggests that our thinking constitutes the universe in such a manner that it must be *about* us—it must be concerned about us. Only then does she switch perspectives. What if we are not the center of the universe? What if *it* thinks, too? If it does think, indeed, the question is what it thinks about. Not necessarily about us. And if the universe does not think about us, Swenson says, carrying her argument even further, then the principle of causality need not necessarily run the universe since she has established causality as the principle of *our* thinking: “must there be cause / in the universe?” The words “be” and “cause” immediately following each other evoke the word “because” from above, which the poet had used to emphasize the principle of our causal thinking.

In other words, when we think about the universe, we impose causality, laws, on it. If we abandon our anthropocentric view, we might lose those principles and laws along with it. The universe, after all, might run according to a pattern of its own, unknown to us. It might not even be concerned about us at all. The question of what the universe is about, then, is forever unanswerable, beyond our reach. And we, the thinking species, are left behind, wondering what will become of us, what our meaning is: “what / about / us?” The poem ends just as abstractly as it began, evoking puzzlement about the *about* of both the universe and of us. And yet, by having created this swirl of thinking, she has carefully intertwined the universe and human beings. *Thinking* as a possibility that might work both ways has bridged the gap between the two.

Swenson’s unwillingness to definitively state her human view of the universe is also reflected in the poem “3 Models of the Universe” from the volume *Half Sun Half Sleep*.

### 3 MODELS OF THE UNIVERSE

1.

At moment X  
 the universe began.  
 It began at point X.  
 Since then,  
 through the Hole in a Nozzle,  
 stars have spewed. An  
 inexhaustible gush  
 populates the void forever.

2.

The universe was there  
before time ran.  
A grain  
slipped in the glass:  
the past began.  
The Container  
of the Stars expands;  
the sand  
of matter multiplies forever.

3.

From zero radius  
to a certain span,  
the universe, a Large Lung  
specked with stars,  
inhales time  
until, turgid, it can  
hold no more,  
and collapses. Then  
space breathes, and inhales again,  
and breathes again: Forever.

(105)

A brief discussion of this poem shall underline the point that was made above. Both the word “Models” and the number 3 in the title suggest that these are only some (of innumerable) possibilities to think about the universe—or, rather, about the beginning of the universe. Swenson alludes to scientific and philosophical speculations. While the first stanza conjures up the notion of the big bang at point zero in time, the second stanza suggests that the beginning of the universe coincides with the beginning of time, which seems to have happened incidentally with “A grain / slipped in the glass.” The third stanza focuses more on space, though the concept of time is predominant in all three stanzas. In the last one the poet evokes the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximenes’ theory that the *arché*, the original substance out of which the universe came into being, was air and breathing. The image of the Large Lung that keeps breathing again and again is reminiscent of the original breathing as life-giving force. As many poems by Swenson deal with the concept of time, this aspect is conspicuous here, too. The word *forever* concludes every single

stanza, suggesting that what characterizes, in her view, the universe, is the continuity of time. The moment X—at which time began, as it reads at the beginning of the poem—can actually be equated with forever, since “forever – is composed of Nows”, as Emily Dickinson has said (J 624, *The Complete Poems* 307).

May Swenson, as Kirstin Hotelling Zona puts it, needs “to render the world in a new way” (*Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop & May Swenson* 61), and she designs a world of connectedness, both among humans and between humans and the universe. I will now illustrate how she defies the philosopher’s solipsistic prison of the *I* by affirming the existence of the *you* as a prerequisite for the existence of the *I*: “You are, therefore I am.” One of the most obvious examples in which she turns the Cartesian principle upside down is the poem “You Are” (*The Complete Love Poems* 41). The title itself announces the cancellation of the unshakable philosophical principle. She even copies the philosopher’s method of doubting, but again in a reversed manner and in order to end up with a different conclusion. Actually, she starts out with the conclusion by declaring, “I dwell / in you / and so / I know / I am.” It is certainly no coincidence that each of these five lines consists of two words, the word pairs emphasizing two as the sum of *I* and *you*. Swenson adopts Descartes’ *therefore* in the middle line, by saying “and so.” Moreover, the conclusion, “I know / I am” combines the philosopher’s two-part syllogism, I think/know (therefore) I am, but by fusing them she makes the knowing that *I am* even stronger. This knowledge receives its evidence from the fact that I recognize my own existence through the other, the *you* who functions as my mirror. Recall that *seeing* for Swenson is more than just passively *perceiving*; seeing means to create, to constitute, to call into being. And for the poet who refuses to identify the *I* once and for all as the center of the constitution of the universe, *seeing* involves frequent changes in perspective. So it is not because I see you but because I *am being seen* by you that I realize I exist. Or, to go a step further, because I see (in the mirror that is you) that you see me, I conclude that I exist: “you are my mirror / in your eye’s well I float / my reality proven.” The word *reality* here is more powerful and more suggestive than the word *existence* would be, for this reality is not something static but dynamic and organic. “I float in your eye’s well” suggests the potential of growing, which further on in the poem is explicitly expanded upon when she says, “I exist in your verdant garden / you have planted me / I am glad to grow.” This goes way beyond the static recognition of the philosopher. The *you* not only verifies my existence, it enables my reality in the sense of supporting my growing and developing self.

This poem is a love poem, of course, in spite of its dwelling on philosophical reasoning. “Because I dwell in you, her poetic syllogism runs, I know I am. Because you enfold me, we know you are. Therefore, she exclaims happily, ‘It is proven and the universe exists!’ The lovers ‘prove’ each other’s reality, confirming their own existence of all things. They also liberate each other from the enclosures of mind, from the isolated cell of the self” (Hirsch 336). I think it is obvious that she plays around with Descartes’ principle here and confirms a view that could be compared to that of Martin Buber, who based his philosophy on the concept that whenever I say *I*, this *I* is part of the context *I-You* or of the context *I-It*—the first one referring to the *I*’s relationships to other human beings, the second one to the *I*’s relation to the objective world. Ideally, the *I-Thou* relationship, as he calls it, consists of the mutual respect between *I* and *you*, the mutual affirmation of each other’s reality, each other’s essence, and of being different, other. Buber uses the term “mutual confirmation” to describe this principle, which for him characterizes a profound and authentic relationship between *I* and *you*. Swenson repeatedly evokes this principle in the poem; for instance, she writes, “and I unfurled in your rich soil” or

I dream of your hands...  
to tend me  
to pour at my roots  
the clear the flashing water  
of your love.

(41–42)

However, Buber’s emphasis also rests on the word *mutual*. In the second half of the poem, Swenson turns the mirror image around. “If I live in you” then this proves your existence as well: “for if I live in you / you live holding me / enfolding me you *are*.” The rhyming words “holding” and “enfolding” beautifully manage to construct a bridge from *I* to *you*. While the word “holding” still evokes the subject-subject split, the word “enfolding” suggests a fusion, a sense of having bridged the gap. Almost literally, toward the end of the poem, her argument for the existence of the *I* through the *you* (as well as the *affirmation* of the *I* through the *you*) is turned around. Now it is the *I* that is a nurturing garden for the *you*, and it is *my* eye that reflects the existence of the *you*: “my eye is a mirror / in which you float / a well where you dwell smiling.” The poet adds the word “smiling,” which underlines the joy of *being* through the other,

which never seems to be an issue in the cold, abstract, joyless design of the philosopher's world. As Schulman remarks, "the poet who continually questions existence finds love at the source of the quest: existence depends on the other. The bridge between self and other is basic to the polarities..." (9).

So far, the poet, in a circular movement suggested by the mirror image, has spun by means of her words an argument for the existence—or, rather, reality—of both *I* and *you*. This argument enables her to prove the existence of the universe: "it is proven," she continues, "and the universe exists!" Swenson's word for Buber's *mutual affirmation* in this poem is, of course, *love*, the principle that runs the universe since everything reflects everything else: "one reflects the other / man mirrors god / image in eye affirms its sight." The evocation of Emerson's "transparent eyeball" is striking here, though more powerful. Dave Smith has recognized an "Emersonian cartoon" in some of her other poems. "Vision, seeing, looking, recording," he argues, "are so pervasive in her poems that one almost forgets how active she makes all the senses in the service of penetrating surface" (396). Again, Emerson's transparent-eyeball theory is much more static, whereas Swenson's poetic image involves dynamic interaction, especially through the word "affirms" and, three lines later, the "palpable roundness" that "spins." Thus, what makes the "ball" round, palpable, spin, reflect, and affirm, is the principle of love, of which one says, that is God. "And is that all?" she asks. "Love for her is akin to Martin Buber's definition of God: a power to be found, from time to time, 'between me and thee'" (Earnshaw 337).

But meanwhile she has raised more questions, imitating, as it seems, Descartes' method of doubting to render that very method vain and useless:

no one  
 can be sure  
 by *himself*  
 of his being  
  
 and the world's seeing  
 .....  
 is suspect  
 (41) [My emphasis]

Zona writes that this clearly "marks her portrait of selfhood as antiesentialist" ("A 'Dangerous Game of Change'" 221). It is also her severest

rejection of the Cartesian principle. No one can be sure *by himself*. I need you to be sure of my being and to be sure of the being of the universe.

Swenson raises the following, actually rhetorical questions in a form reminiscent of Descartes' methodological doubting: "do I live / does the world live / do I live in it / or does it live in me?" These questions are formulated to ridicule the philosopher's approach since the third and fourth questions cannot even be raised without the first two having been answered in the affirmative. Questions 3 and 4 contain the philosopher's dilemma. His method of doubting leads me to the proof of my existence but makes me end up in the solitary confinement of my self, from which I have to reintroduce the universe after having cancelled it out. The result is that the universe exists merely in my mind as the contents of my consciousness. "Am I?" is a question that was never raised by Descartes and yet is urgently suggested to the poet because of Descartes' way of reasoning for his affirmative answer. Swenson's answer is the same only to a certain extent; it is more ambiguous, implying a different philosophy: "am I? yes / and never was / until you made me." One is tempted to read it as *yes and no*. By linking the "yes" with "and never," she seemingly creates a paradox. However, she has already prepared us for this statement in the previous lines: the offspring of beginning and end is "is / not was or will be." Thus, "and never was" is meaningless, for what counts is what is. And what is, is only because of the principle of mutuality.

It is also significant that her concept of mutuality, which she conjures up through the image of the mirror but also through the "roundness," suggests endlessness, the absence of beginning and end. She reached this insight after searching for the "limits / of all being," seeking "pattern purpose aim" and "shape" in her "own eyes' seeing."

"She believes, apparently, that the world functions according to some hidden final purpose," says Dave Smith (396). But feeling galled by this venture, she abandons herself to the endless web of the world's intricacies: "now I know," she says, "beginning and end / are one / and slay each other." This is a perfect way of evoking duality within unity. Beginning and end stand for past and future. They are one, and yet they must be two to slay each other. Even though the word "slaying" implies death, the result is "birth," the affirmation of *being* as *now*, as *is* rather than *was* or *will be*: "but their offspring is what is / not was or will be." In Descartes' principle the emphasis is on "am," reducing *being* to that of the *I*. For the poet the emphasis is on *is*, affirming the being of everything that *is*: the universe and human beings. *Is*, in its affirmation of being, is universal and therefore plural in spite of its grammatical singularity, whereas *am* is singular and inescapably lonely.

Even though the poet has thus established the reality of the universe with its human beings, she does not attempt to further penetrate the mystery of the universe. Swenson believes some mysteries should remain untouched, “because mystery in itself is useful to us as human beings. If we ever got to where there were no mysteries left, we wouldn’t be human” (“An Interview with May Swenson: July 14, 1978” 65). The universe is a “web of chaos,” a “bursting void,” but this web assumes all its significance through merely “two threads” “crossed upon each other,” the two threads of *I* and *you*, who “are perpetual each according to the other.”

In a verbally less explicit poem, Swenson uses the two threads crossed upon each other as a visual design to emphasize this point.

UNTITLED

I will be earth you be the flower  
 You have found my root you are the rain  
 I will be boat and you the rower  
 You rock you toss me you are the sea  
 How be steady earth that's now a flood  
 The root's the oar's afloat where's blown our bud  
 We will be desert pure salt the seed  
 Burn radiant sex born scorpion need

(*Half Sun Half Sleep* 108)

“Untitled” does not develop any philosophical argument. Rather, it paints a picture, both verbal and graphic, of the interaction between *I* and *you*. As far as the semantic level is concerned, the interaction between *I* and *you* is characterized in a similar manner as in “You Are.” The “earth” and “the flower” remind us of the image of the garden; the way they are connected evokes their mutual nurturing. The juxtaposition of *I* and *you* is mirrored in the combination of two polarities that complement each other. Thus, the one needs the other; the word “need” concludes the poem and thus underlines the mutual dependence, in a positive sense, of the one and the other, the *I* and the *you*: earth and flower, root and rain, boat and rower (reminiscent of Dickinson), earth and sea, desert and seed. With the same space between all words, the impression is seemingly evoked that there is no connection between them. However, it is this spacing that simultaneously creates a regular and symmetrical pattern.

The two crisscrossed lines seem to have been inserted at random because of their irregular serpentine pattern. However, they cross each other where separating the words “you” and “me.” The crossing point has the effect of both connecting and separating the two, which would be in line with Buber’s principle of the *Between* that both connects and separates *I* and *you*. What is meant by the simultaneously connecting and separating *Between*, is the idea of *I* and *you* approaching each other as closely as possible through mutual affirmation yet at the same time keeping their distance from each other as a sign of respect for the boundaries of the other, the otherness in its mystery and impenetrability. Zona summarizes the message of this poem as follows:

The lack of punctuation accentuates the contingency of being, where to be—‘will be’ / ‘you be’ / ‘How be’—is regularly redrafted in the shifting nexus of desire. ‘I’ becomes ‘you’ becomes ‘I’ becomes ‘we’ as the articulation of identity constructs subjectivity as contiguous, transitive, always specific but never isolated. The hand-drawn lines through the poem further underscore this sense of interweaving: crossing directly between ‘you’ and ‘me,’ Swenson’s careful scribbles separate self and other while uniting them as well. (“A ‘Dangerous Game of Change’” 233)

In the poem “Facing,” Swenson applies almost identical means in order to bridge the gap between *I* and *you* and, at the same time, to leave the individuality of each unviolated. Visually, the poem is arranged in two columns that are separated by a white space that runs horizontally through it. They “have to be read down the page rather than across” (Schulman 13). Swenson makes frequent use of this device of the lacuna, arranging her poems in twin columns, “placing the caesura at the center, lining up those bits of silence or white space until the poem organizes itself around that central spine: bilateral symmetry” (Doty 107). This arrangement evokes again the image of the mirror, which is also explicitly mentioned at the end of column two: “I sculpture you / and in my constant mirror keep / your portrait.” The numbers 1 and 2 on top of each column suggest both the duality and the oneness of *I* and *you*. The oneness or togetherness of both is also visually reflected in the first line of column one, where the inverted syntactical arrangement of the line “You I love” manages to place *you* and *I* side by side, the added word “love” semantically creating their togetherness. Also, in this manner the “You” is capitalized just as the “I.”

FACING

I 2

<p>You I love  you are that light  by which I am discovered.  In anonymous night  by your eye am I born.  And I know  that by your body I glow,  and by your face  I make my circle.  It is your heat  fires me  that my skin is sweet  my veins race  my bones are radiant.</p> <p>You are that central One  by which I am balanced.  By your power it is done  that in the sky of being  my path is thrown.  And I glide in your sling  and cannot fall into darkness.  For by the magnet  of your body  charged with love  do I move.</p>	<p>As you are sun to me  O I am moon to you.  And give you substance  by my sight  and motion and radiance.  You are an ocean  shaped by my gaze.  My pulsing rays  draw you naked  from the spell of night.  By my pull  are you waked  to know that you are beautiful.</p> <p>I rake up your steep  luster and your passion;  by my sorcery your wealth is sown  to you on your own breast,  your purples changed to opals.</p> <p>So with love's light  I sculpture you  and in my constant mirror keep  your portrait  that you may adore  yourself as I do.</p>
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*(The Complete Love Poems 21)*

As in "You Are," Swenson here expresses the affirmation of the knowledge of my existence through being seen by the *you*: "by your eye am I born," which also repeats the other poem's notion that before I was seen by you, "I never was." And here, too, seeing as an act of affirming the other's existence works both ways: "You are an ocean / shaped by my gaze." The theme of "the utter dependence of being upon its opposite is dominant here" (Schulman 11) as well. Even though the two columns are supposed to be read separately, in the sixth line, for instance, one is tempted to read vertically over the space of the lacuna to end up with "And I know You are...." The horizontal lacuna that separates the two columns can be read as a visual representation of Buber's *Between* that both separates and connects 1 and 2, *I* and *you*, because as white space it marks both an absence and a presence and thus both links and separates. As white space it could be interpreted as nothing and therefore easily removed. And yet it is there; its visibility underlines its invisibility. Buber's *Between* is just as intangible, a term most convincingly visualized by means of a lacuna.

It becomes obvious in Swenson's love poems that the lacuna of the *Between* almost dissolves itself in love relationships. This idea is perhaps most explicitly expressed in her poem "Symmetrical Companion" (*The Complete Love Poems* 68), in which she says of the *I* and *you* that they are "visible to millions / yet revealed only to each other." Even though Buber insists that the mystery of each individual self remain ultimately unknown and untouched by any other, he would agree that love is a justified means to fathom the mystery of the beloved *you*. Love is the key to the *you* that unfolds the other in his/her purest authenticity without violating the secrecy of the beloved's being. Revealing is thus unveiling in order to enable intimate, subtle, profound communication between *I* and *you*. The "symmetrical companion" therefore suggests not only a close similarity between *I* and *you* but the potential of understanding each other deeply. And yet this companion is an other—not even a twin, but grand in his/her significance: "Without you I do not yet exist." Thus the silence, the lacuna between the two columns, demands the reader's attention, because it is the "attention to the silence in between [which] is the amulet that makes it work," as Swenson herself remarked (Howard, "May Swenson" 119).

I propose to read Swenson's poem "Feel Me," which has puzzled most critics and will certainly continue to do so, along the same lines, as an attempt at healing the Cartesian split between the *I* and the rest of the world. In this poem, as in so many others, Swenson applies what Sue

## DE-CARTESIANIZING THE UNIVERSE

FEEL ME

"Feel me to do right," our father said  
on his death bed. We did not quite  
know-- in fact, not at all-- what he meant.  
His last whisper was spent as through a slot in a wall.  
He left us a key, but how did it  
fit? "Feel me  
to do right." Did it mean

that, though he died, he would be felt  
through some aperture, or by some unseen instrument  
our dad just then had come  
to know? So, to do right always, we need but feel his  
spirit? Or was it merely  
his apology for dying? "Feel that I  
do right in not trying, as you insist, to stay

on your side. There is the wide  
gateway and the splendid tower,  
and you implore me to wait here, with the worms!"  
Had he defined his terms, and could we discriminate  
among his motives, we might  
have found out how to "do right" before we died-- supposing  
he felt he suddenly knew

what dying was.  
"You do wrong because you do not feel  
as I do now" was maybe the sense. "Feel me, and emulate  
my state, for I am becoming less dense--  
I am feeling right, for the first  
time." And then the vessel burst, and we were kneeling  
around an emptiness.

We cannot feel our  
father now. His power courses through us, yes, but he--  
the chest and cheek, the foot and palm,  
the mouth of oracle-- is calm. And we still seek  
his meaning. "Feel me," he said,  
and emphasized that word.  
Should we have heard it as a plea

for a caress-- A constant caress,  
since flesh to flesh was all that we could do right  
if we would bless him? The dying must feel  
the pressure of that  
question-- lying flat, turning cold  
from brow to heel-- the hot  
cowards there above

protesting their love, and saying  
"What can we do? Are you all  
right?" While the wall opens  
and the blue night pours through. "What  
can we do? We want to do what's right."  
"Lie down with me, and hold me, tight. Touch me. Be  
with me. Feel with me. Feel me, to do right."

*(Iconographs 34)*

Russell has called Swenson's "favorite visual format—the symmetrical arrangement of lines built around a column of white space" (136).

The poem demonstrates the family members' attempts at coming to terms with the semantics of "feel me" and "to do right," at interpreting the "key" their father has left them: What did he mean? That he wished to be connected to them even after his death? That he wished them to understand that leaving now instead of trying to stay was the right thing for him to do in spite of their wishing him to live? Did he want to leave them a legacy so they would learn how to do right before they had to die? Did he express his insight that the most important thing was physical touch and caress? Did he ask for their empathy, "to feel with him"? I do not agree with Russell, who believes that this poem "begins with a key that does not seem to fit in any known door" (137).

I would like to demonstrate how this poem, like the others, offers both a verbal and a visual design of how to bridge the gap between *I* and *you*. It is the father speaking, on his death bed. He is speaking to his family, as we know from Swenson's comment on the actual event on which this poem is based. The father is reaching out to his family members, creating a bridge by means of the word "feel." At the end of the poem, the meaning of the word "feel" is turned into "touch." The verb "to feel" is a legitimate substitute for "to think" since Descartes' *cogito* means "to have consciousness of something." The translation of the *cogito* as "I think," as we have seen, has entailed the split between the *I* and everything else. The verb *to feel*, by its very semantics, effects the opposite—connection instead of split, union instead of separation. This is explicitly ensured by the grammatical object, "me." Thus, "feel me" connects the *I* with the *you*. It is interesting to observe that at the beginning of the poem Swenson separates the two words, "feel" and "me," by means of the lacuna. In the very last line, however, the words "Feel me" are placed together before the lacuna. One could therefore argue that finally the gap has been transcended; the lacuna as its visible representation has been dissolved. Moreover, if the two sides of the lacuna are to be seen as representing the side of the dead on the one hand and the side of the living on the other, this theory is also dispelled because we find the expression "feel me" as one unit on either side—in the fifth line of the fifth stanza on the right side, and in the seventh line of the seventh stanza on the left side.

While saying this, of course, the father is still alive. However, as clearly stated in the first two lines of the second stanza, his request is meant to bridge the gap not only from *I* to *you* but from the dead to the living: "Did it mean // that, though he died, he would be felt / through some

aperture"? I think all the various possibilities of interpreting the father's legacy are right, because they all aim at transcending the gap between him and the others. The gap is there, visually on the page. But again it is the poet's use of the enjambment that offers strategies of overcoming this nothingness that is. The fifth line of the first stanza, for instance, reads: "He left us a key." The break between "us" and "a key" creates a double meaning. "He left us" as read by itself signifies their separation through their father's death. However, by adding "a key" she no longer emphasizes his having left them but rather his having bequeathed to them the tool to stay connected, since the key is the means to unlock doors that separate rooms, this side and the other side. The key, as it turns out, seems to be to "feel me." When the father has expired, feeling him in the sense of touching him seems to have become meaningless because the parts of his body, chest and cheek, foot and palm, are "calm," as she puts it, that is to say no longer responding either physically or verbally since the image also conjures up the word *silence*.

Feeling, like seeing, is a very important form of sensing for Swenson. It is her starting point for expanding consciousness. "To *sense* then becomes to *make sense*," as she says in "A Note about *Iconographs*" (87). However, one must not overlook the soothing implication of the word "calm," suggesting that his battle with death as well as with life is over. Yet their first reaction to his death is that they "were kneeling / around an emptiness." Even though the word "emptiness" suggests total absence, either physical or spiritual, the word itself marks a something, a presence around which the family members gather. The lacuna between "around" and "emptiness" visibly signifies that this emptiness is thus cancelled because the emptiness has become the center of the kneeling community. Moreover, the indefinite article "an" makes the emptiness individual and specific, conjuring up the wholeness of the one who has gone. The meaning of "to do right" has been puzzling as well. I disagree with Diana Hume George that it is about aging and dying right (cf. 137). I believe that it mirrors the request or command of the father: the right thing to do is to "feel me." That the emphasis is on "feel me" is also reflected in the title of the poem where "to do right" is not mentioned. Also, "Feel" and "Me" are separated in the title by the lacuna, which conveys the request to bridge this separation. The father's legacy is then: Keep in touch with me. Feel with me in my last hour, touch my body, feel my spirit when I am gone; feel the other in all these implications because this is the key I have left you, the key that dissolves the nothingness that is between *me* and *you*. What Ann Stanford said of the poem "Cause & Effect," one could comment on this

Gudrun M. Grabher

BLEEDING

Stop bleeding said the knife.  
I would if I could said the cut.  
Stop bleeding you make me messy with this blood.  
I'm sorry said the cut.  
Stop or I will sink in farther said the knife.  
Don't said the cut.  
The knife did not say it couldn't help it but  
it sank in farther.  
If only you didn't bleed said the knife I wouldn't  
have to do this.  
I know said the cut I bleed too easily I hate  
that I can't help it I wish I were a knife like  
you and didn't have to bleed.  
Well meanwhile stop bleeding will you said the knife.  
Yes you are a mess and sinking in deeper said the cut I  
will have to stop.  
Have you stopped by now said the knife.  
I've almost stopped I think.  
Why must you bleed in the first place said the knife.  
For the same reason maybe that you must do what you  
must do said the cut.  
I can't stand bleeding said the knife and sank in farther.  
I hate it too said the cut I know it isn't you it's  
me you're lucky to be a knife you ought to be glad about that.  
Too many cuts around said the knife they're  
messy I don't know how they stand themselves.  
They don't said the cut.  
You're bleeding again.  
No I've stopped said the cut see you are coming out now the  
blood is drying it will rub off you'll be shiny again and clean.  
If only cuts wouldn't bleed so much said the knife coming  
out a little.  
But then knives might become dull said the cut.  
Aren't you still bleeding a little said the knife.  
I hope not said the cut.  
I feel you are just a little.  
Maybe just a little but I can stop now.  
I feel a little wetness still said the knife sinking in a  
little but then coming out a little.  
Just a little maybe just enough said the cut.  
That's enough now stop now do you feel better now said the knife.  
I feel I have to bleed to feel I think said the cut.  
I don't I don't have to feel said the knife drying now  
becoming shiny.

(Iconographs 13)

poem: “It is as if invisible wires are connecting the two sides of the poem in a careful criss-cross pattern” (71).

“‘Bleeding’ and ‘Feel Me,’” Alicia Ostriker observes, “have in common, technically, a white line cutting the text” (“May Swenson and the Shapes of Speculation” 37). In her reading of this poem, Ostriker says that “[b]y its sharply enclosed form, ‘Bleeding’ epitomizes vast questions of writing by and about women” (37) because it is “about the connection between *bleeding* and *feeling*, which in our culture are both believed to be natural to women, and a bit disgusting, and certainly threatening, while a dry superiority to feeling is a major sign of desirable masculinity” (36). While I propose to approach Swenson’s poem “Bleeding” from a different angle—that is, as a critique of the Cartesian principle—my reading certainly goes hand in hand with Ostriker’s. The fictitious dialogue in the poem between a knife and a cut and its bleeding caused by the knife can be understood on a metaphorical level as the bleeding of the Cartesian wound. The knife, then, is the Cartesian rationalizing, the cut is his principle of the *cogito, ergo sum*, and the bleeding is the result of the wound: the cut has severed the *I* from the world. As a result, it is bleeding. This is none of the philosopher’s business, but it is the poet’s. She introduces what has been ignored: the bleeding of the wound.

Before looking at the metaphorical implications of the wound, consider a literal cut to the body caused by a knife. Let’s say I cut my finger. Depending on the depth of the cut, I have severed skin, flesh, tissue, even nerves. The result, inevitably, is bleeding, and it hurts. If the cut is only on the surface, the healing process—that is to say, the forming of new skin, the moving together of tissue—happens more or less on its own. But a deeper wound may require stitches to heal properly. Otherwise, the severed tissue and nerves might gape and the healing of the wound could cause ugly scars; also, the wound might get infected if not properly taken care of. If looked at under the microscope, the cut would not represent itself as a straight line but as an irregular one.

This image of the cut as crooked is visually reflected in the graphic design of the poem, and this open space of the cut, running as a white line through the poem, is significant. “[I]n both poems [‘Feel Me’ and ‘Bleeding’] space is substantial” (Ostriker, “May Swenson and the Shapes of Speculation” 37). This jagged visible line in “Bleeding” is reinforced by the fact that the knife keeps moving deeper and deeper, suggesting a cut of considerable depth (“The knife... / sank in farther,” “I can’t stand bleeding said the knife and sank in farther,” “sinking in a little bit”). Thus, the wound is most likely not to heal properly without stitches. Even the

bleeding itself seems to be hard to stop, as explicated in the poem. One might even imagine blood running through the cut of the wound, physically and metaphorically, through the crooked line running through the poem. If we call this line a caesura (or lacuna), then it imitates the meaning inherent in it (cf. Pack 393). In this poem, Swenson does not offer her stitches to fix the wound. Rather, she makes the wound itself, as well as its cause, visible.

The dialogue between the knife and the cut serves to illustrate ironically the two sides of perpetrator and victim. This irony reaches its climax when the knife enjoys its act of cutting but is bothered by the bleeding. It would prefer a cut without the mess of blood. If we exchange the actors for philosopher and first principle (the one has caused the other, just like the knife has caused the cut) we get the following: Descartes, as a scientist, looked for an unshakable axiom as the fundamental principle of philosophy. His way to this goal was his method of doubting. He used this method consistently and radically to see what would remain. He doubted our sensory perception of the world (dreams, hallucinations, *fata morgana*s), he even doubted our logical and rational capacities to think (deceiving God). What he could not doubt, however, was his convincing conclusion that since I think, I must necessarily exist: “*cogito, ergo sum*,” translated as “I *think*, therefore I am” into all kinds of languages. Of course, his revolutionary discovery came at a high cost. On the way to his principle he had cancelled out the world and was faced with the dilemma of finding a strategy to retrieve it. Whatever he tried, though, failed as it revealed itself as a shaky backdoor to a stage with one single actor left: the *I*. No matter which strategy he applied, he had forever separated the *I* from the rest of the world. But the philosopher refused to see the cut he had caused, let alone the bleeding and the pain entailed by the cut.

The third but last line of the poem lends itself perfectly as a starting point for reading the poem as a staging of this philosophical dilemma: “I feel I have to bleed to feel I think said the cut.” If we keep in mind the legacy of the previously discussed poem, we remember that “feel” is an important word for the poet, much more important than “think.” Russell writes, “Swenson had an innate distrust for the separation of thinking and feeling states. What she recognized, instead, was the seductive energy of words and ideas ...” (138). So this line can be read as an ironic comment on the vanity of the philosophical insight “I think” (therefore I am). In order to come up with such a simple statement, “I think,” I have to bleed first. Actually, the enjambment and the ambiguity created by it contain both the allusion to the “I think” and to the “I am” because the line can

be read in the following two ways: “I feel I have to bleed to feel I,” that is, to feel my reality; and secondly, “I feel I have to bleed to feel I think.” Descartes’ principle is thus targeted backward. In order to gain the simple recognition that I think and that I therefore must exist, I have to bleed, suffer a wound that seems even beyond healing. This peculiar dialogue, then, starts out with an accusation on the victim’s side. The knife/philosopher is upset about the cut bleeding and commands it to stop. It/he is upset because “you make me messy with this blood.” Threatening the cut with sinking even deeper if it refuses to stop bleeding, which the cut can’t help even though it feels sorry, it/he does sink farther. One could compare this to the philosopher’s several steps through his doubting procedure. He would prefer to move from one step to the next, from doubting the senses to the even deeper doubting of our rational capacities, but does not want to be bothered by the mess of blood. The cut keeps repeating that bleeding is its inevitable companion that cannot be stopped by any commands. The cut is clearly depicted as the victim, while the knife stands as cold-blooded perpetrator, to stick to the central metaphor.

The philosopher proceeds with his method in cold blood, compelled to do so since his rationalizing is as cutting as a knife. The cut even believes that knives need this bleeding, because otherwise they “might become dull,” the word “dull” suggesting connotations such as *stupid*, *unimaginative*, *mindless*. The point, however, is that the knife/philosopher is without feelings: “I don’t I don’t have to feel said the knife.” Feeling would be an obstacle to the straight-line rationalizations of the philosopher. Feeling would stop him from cutting since the entailed bleeding would ask him to stop. All that the knife/philosopher is capable of feeling is “a little wetness” but not the full impact of the wound. In the end, however, the knife is “drying,” that is to say, the blood is drying and will rub off, leaving the knife shiny, as announced earlier by the cut. If the knife stands for the philosopher, however, then he is drying up too, which leaves him unmoved, sober, dispassionate, unimaginative, cold, as the word “dry” suggests. The word “shiny,” therefore, is far from evoking the connotation of “brilliant” as might be adequate to describe the philosopher’s deed. Rather, this shininess evokes the sensation of coldness and edginess, the philosopher’s being untouched as if nothing had happened, blameless and flawless without a spot of guilt, ready to cut again.

I have argued that May Swenson uses both verbal and visual designs to illustrate and heal this epistemological cut. In one pure instant she abolishes this world of bleeding wounds and recreates a world of links, bridges, touchings, “revealing connections where oppositions normally

endure" (Zona, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop & May Swenson 122). Leela Lakshmi Narayen comes to a similar conclusion: "man's experience of the world becomes a constantly renewable bridge between knower, known, and act of knowing, or a continuing subject-object coalescence whose impact constitutes experiential knowledge" (103). Several years ago I was asked to give a paper at a conference about feminist issues. That was when I started to explore my criticism of the Cartesian principle, wondering whether a woman's mind might not have come up with alternative ways of translating the Cartesian *cogito*. "I think" causes a split between me and everything else as my object. Alternative choices such as "I feel," which linguistically is a perfectly legitimate way of translating *cogito*, would entail a bridging of the gap between *I* and *you*, *I* and *the universe*. The title of that paper was: "If Descartes Had Been a Woman?" May Swenson is an answer.