Body My House

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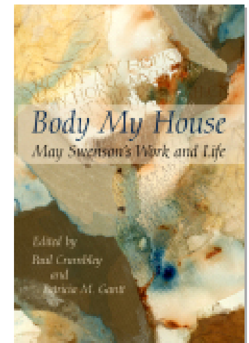

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Material Girl

May Swenson's Logopoetic Materialism

Cynthia Hogue

Language for the poet is what pigment is for the painter.
May Swenson

I want to open with an anecdote about a material object, a book that is illustrative of the bifurcated history of reception of May Swenson's work. Buried in my past lies the history of my heterosexual blind spots, a piece of which was uncannily returned to me when I began the process of writing this essay. I owned, I knew, a couple of May Swenson books from my student days, but what I had forgotten was that one of them, *Half Sun Half Sleep*, was not actually mine, but one I'd nicked I don't remember when from my mother's collection. It was a gift from one of her high-school English students, for whom my mother had been a favorite teacher, and who had been a best friend of mine before life separated us. Anne likely bought this book in 1968 when it came out in paperback and for some reason, after graduation in 1969, dropped the book off at my father's diner, with a note on the inside cover: "Mr. Hogue, please give this to Mrs. H. I think she would like it."

It is possible that my friend had in mind the Swedish translations included at the end of that collection, since my mother was the daughter of a Swedish-speaking Lutheran minister and his wife (Swenson's parents were also Swedish Lutherans before their conversion to Mormonism). It seems unlikely to me that my friend was trying to convey a subtle message

about her identity to my mother, since my mother was no more capable than I at the time of decoding Swenson's sensual, homoerotic imagery. I pick up this book *now*, of course, and happen upon the trace of the girl my friend had been almost forty years ago, a closeted sixteen-year-old lesbian reading a major poet whose "complex positioning of her sexual identity," as Mark Doty observes of Swenson's capacity to write both delicately and forthrightly, is not "a matter of being in the closet but rather of a thrilling dance of reticence and self-disclosure" (89).

Which is to say, except for those who could see, her sexual identity was (in)visible: like the Purloined Letter, hidden in plain sight.[1] As Kirsten Hotelling Zona tells us, Swenson, like her friend Elizabeth Bishop, was a lesbian poet who refused to lodge herself "within a growing field of woman-identified poetry" during the rise of second-wave feminism.[2] In the tantalizing biography of Swenson in photos, *May Swenson: A Poet's Life in Photos*,[3] the photographs tell the story about which the words are discreet. But as Teresa de Lauretis observes of Western culture historically, lesbian (in)visibility is a problem as well as a choice, because the speaking subject is still so often assumed to be male (even when the assumption is not that the subject is heterosexual: what de Lauretis terms "the tropism of hommo-sexuality"). The refrain of so many women poets of Swenson's generation (and also of their modernist foremothers) to posit a culturally situated poetic subject is arguably a symptom, at least in part, of their

1. Although Doty does not comment on the heterosexual blind spot that rendered lesbian display in Swenson's work unreadable to heterosexual readers in her day, we come to a very similar conclusion about the play of self-disclosure in her poetry, what I'm calling lesbian (in)visibility, and even a nearly identical comment (albeit Doty's, made five years earlier): "From the perspective of 1999, it looks as if May Swenson were hiding in plain sight" (Ibid.). In response to a number of invitations for inclusion in such anthologies as *Amazon Poetry* (1975), as Sue Russell recounts, May Swenson "expressed her pleasure at the possibility of having certain poems understood in their proper context, but she was apparently less happy about the implication of being [identified solely as] a 'lesbian poet'" (131). For a discussion of Swenson's ambivalence about being identified as a *woman* poet, see Sue Russell, "A Mysterious and Lavish Power." On the aesthetics of confessionalism vs. Swenson's (as well as Moore's and Bishop's) more reticent poetry, see Neil Arditi, "In the Bodies of Words."
2. This quote comes from Zona's afterword in *Dear Elizabeth* (26). For the full discussion of Swenson's relationship to Bishop (both poetic and personal), and the first full critical treatment of Swenson's work that has been published in book form, see Zona's monograph, *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and May Swenson*, 95–119. For an earlier, nuanced presentation of some of the Bishop-Swenson letters on which Zona builds, see Richard Howard, "Elizabeth Bishop–May Swenson Correspondence." Howard characterizes Bishop's and Swenson's epistolary exchanges from 1963–65 as "a kind of causerie between the two lesbian poets about their situation as lesbians, as poets" (171).
3. Eds. Knudson and Bigelow; hereafter, *MS*.

struggle for literary and cultural respect from men as *poets* rather than *poetesses* or *lady poets*.[4]

In her essay, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," de Lauretis contends that it is very difficult to devise "strategies of representation which will, in turn, alter the standard of vision, the frame of reference of visibility, of *what can be seen*" (qtd. in de Lauretis, *How Do I Look?* 224). Swenson's decision to remain (in)visible was thus culturally as well as personally determined, as suggested by the example of some of the commentators who still gloss lines of (in)visible, homoerotic specificity, as generally poetic—for example,

> I milknip your two Blue-skeined
> blown Rose beauties, too, to sniff
> their berries' blood, up stiff
> pink tips

Mitchell writes, "Like Hopkins, Swenson takes pleasure in enumerating and listing, in rolling out the scrolls of Creation. To mouth is not only to take into the mouth but also to utter, to proclaim" (xix–xx). This reading of Swenson's lines isn't so much wrong as quaint, determinedly steering heterosexual readers away from acknowledging that the details are homoerotic or that heterosexual men are thus put in the position of identifying with a lesbian lover. But the passage unsettles the "normative" center and any "normalizing" (or universalizing) understanding of the passage. In the twenty-first century, as we begin collectively to restore Swenson's distinguished reputation, as well as to place her poetry in the context of her lived experience, what we discover is that among the poetic riches this great poet offers us is the playfully bold manner in which her oeuvre has been contributing to altering the inherited "standard of vision" all along—right under, as it were, our collective *no*'s.

To give a brief example, Swenson's early poem "The Centaur" has for the most part been read as no more than a delightful depiction of childhood play. But surely such lines as the following suggest a sly performance of the charade of masculinity as well:

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4. In addition to being ambivalent about identifying herself as a "woman poet" in the second half of her career, Swenson felt that coming out as a lesbian poet might have negatively affected her career, especially in the years before second-wave feminism, according to her longtime partner and literary executor, R. R. Knudson, who commented on the subject during a discussion at the 2004 May Swenson Symposium at Utah State University.

> But when, with my brother's jackknife,
> I had cut me a long limber horse
> with a good thick knob for a head,
> ....
> I'd straddle and canter him fast. . . .[5]

Capturing the imaginary freedom that precedes assuming one's position on one side or the other of the gender divide in the symbolic order, the girl in Swenson's poem crosses and confuses discrete categories of sexual identity, which are, by implication, as mythic, fantasized, and constructed as the centaur itself. The girl is doubled—implicitly completing herself (she both is and rides her "horse")—(w)hole.

The status of her lack is rendered ambiguous because of the presence of the doubled fetish: although she "dismounts" the "thick knob" of "Rob Roy" between her legs and "smooths" her dress, her mother still asks: "*What's that in your pocket?*" The girl answers, "*Just my knife*," admitting in the space of the poem that she has supplemented "Rob Roy" not with her own "knife," but with her brother's, which "weighted my pocket / and stretched my dress awry" (*TTP* 238). Seeing her daughter still "awry" of the conventions of normative femininity, the mother tries to teach her daughter how better to look the part (in effect, the masquerade of femininity): "*Go tie back your hair*." But the daughter—who has suggestively explored whether the grass is greener on the "other" side ("*Why is your mouth all green?*" the mother then asks)—finally leaves in question the status of her identity: "*Rob Roy, he pulled some clover / as we crossed the field*, I told her" (*TTP* 239).

Is she or isn't she a centaur? That is the question that the poem quietly, playfully refrains from answering. With its regularized, mainly unrhymed tercets and such casual slant rhyme to close the poem, "The Centaur" exceeds the New Critical straitjacket in which it masquerades (in)visibly and by which it is apparently framed. To read the lines of this poem, which is to read a lesbian subject writing into the cultural field of her (in)visibility, we have to read between them. In its configuring of hybrid identity, Swenson's "Centaur" anticipates postmodern reconfigurations of agency and liberating new subjectivities (queer and cyborg, for example).[6]

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5. May Swenson, *New & Selected Things Taking Place* (hereafter, *TTP*), 237.
6. I am paraphrasing an insightful point made by Michael Davidson about modernism and the importance of the inventions of the typewriter, telegraph, and telephone, which all variously separated voice from body: "technology could produce new hybrid identities in which to reconfigure agency. Whether this could lead to . . . new gender categories (cyborg feminism, queer identities) in the late twentieth [century] is still open for debate" (229). See also Zona,

A later Swenson poem, "The Cross Spider," creatively enacts but also critically interrogates that reconfigured agency. The poem makes a trenchant analogy between New Criticism's aspiration to aesthetic autonomy from social context and science's drive for pure inquiry, free of consequential considerations. "The Cross Spider" is on one level a metatextual contemplation of poetry, particularly alluding to Whitman's exploratory Noiseless Patient Spider and Dickinson's Spider Artists. At first, Arabella, the cross spider who was sent into space by NASA to study the effects of weightlessness seems liberated:

> Free where no wind was, no floor, or wall,
> afloat eccentric on immaculate black,
> she tossed a strand straight as light,
> hoping to snag on perihelion and invent
> the Edge, the Corner and the Knot.
> ....
> "Act as if no center exists,"
> Arabella advised herself. Thus inverted
> was deformed the labyrinth of grammar.[7]

When the center doesn't hold, she gamely tells herself to pretend it was never there. The weaving of the web—revealed syntactically to be aligned with the web of grammar (and its warp of gendered symmetry)—is wittily disrupted in this passage. The lines quoted above are both literally and tonally without the gravity upon which the center's "grammar" depends.

As the normative syntactical relations among words are skewed, the poem inscribes the very de-formation and inversion of schematic ordering that it thematizes. Poetic syntax begins to mime the "crazy web" that Arabella weaves in space: "Dizzyness completed it. A half-made, half-mad / asymmetric unnameable jumble, the New / became the Wen. On Witch it sit wirligiggly" (*IOW* 40). Acknowledging the dangers of leaving conventional structures, the grounding that gravity gives, Swenson punningly inverts the modernist aesthetic to "make it new" into a question of timing. "Wen" is *when*, as in *When, if not now?* But it is also the Old

who argues that "It is precisely Swenson's invocation of identity at the liminal site *between* bodies, between self and other, in the slippage between representation and reality, that marks her portrait of selfhood as contingent" (*Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop & May Swenson* 125).

7. May Swenson, "The Cross Spider," *In Other Words* (hereafter, IOW) 39.

English rune for the sound of *w*—the name of the sound itself. With airily deft wordplay, the alliterative w's accumulating to sweep the cobwebs of old patterns of thinking away, Swenson explores what happens when the "proper" order of things is suspended.

On this level, the text's high-wire (im)balancing act exposes the interested groundlessness of mainstream charges that innovative art questioning inherited structures of thought is "half-made" (or poorly made) or "half-mad." "The Cross Spider" wryly implies that this work has been tagged culturally with a deviant femaleness—both *witchy* and *cross* (-eyed? -dressed? or just plain *mad*?). That suspicion, the poem suggests, is because a new syntax for a *wen* identity has been unrecognizable, "unnameable" within dominant culture: a "wen" is also a cyst (*sist-er*?), that is, another de-forming aspect of the poem's body, one that resists return to a sense of wholeness, however illusory (in essence, the castration complex).[8]

Thus, "The Cross Spider" marshals its wit to serious purpose, countering assumptions that linguistic play is all surface-dazzle with no depth. In so doing, the poem astutely notes the cost of technological advances that sacrifice the living (both social and sociable) in the name of science. Arabella is alone in the cosmos, and both her own experiment in form and that of which she was the subject end with her demise: "No other thing or Fly alive. / Afloat in the Black Whole, Arabella / crumple-died. Experiment frittered" (*IOW* 40). In this closing, Swenson's playfulness dies away with the spider, which has been objectified, we suddenly realize, as a "thing," an object of detached scientific inquiry caring nothing for her subjective agency but only for its experiments. By personifying Arabella, Swenson compels us to ask why *we* should care, in our quest (whether for pure knowledge or *the new*), about the consequences of actions taken for a purpose as nebulous as *progress*. Progress in whose eyes? Swenson asks via this poem.

Swenson refrains from answering definitively. Among those possible answers that she contemplates, a poetic inquiry with which she counters scientific inquiry, is one suggested by the fact that "The Cross Spider" precedes a series on NASA and space exploration during the 1980s, "Shuttles." The series begins in celebration and fascination but ends with the tragedy of the Challenger disaster:

8. That Swenson may be playing with and revising structures of female/lesbian subjectivity and agency is suggested by Knudson's and Bigelow's recounting that Swenson read extensively in Freudian theory, as well as texts both on the psychology of women and dream analysis (*MS* 65–66).

> By July NASA conceded that the crew, at "Go throttle up!"
> had to have known the lift-off was fatal. Recorded by
> the "black box" finally recovered form Challenger's debris,
> Commander's voice was heard: He said, "Uh-oh." It took
> ten seconds to hit water. *They were alive. They knew.*
> (*IOW* 47)

The epistemological insight is excruciatingly timebound—ten seconds—representing neither a scientific nor aesthetic investigation but the age-old knowledge of mortality: the end of the poem coincides with the end of the astronauts' lives. Swenson was no Luddite, but she was forceful in analyzing the cost of sacrificing agency to inquiry, whether in science or art; mirroring "the New," her poem reflects the failings of New Criticism with deceptively playful methods, demonstrating that "the Wen" artist cannot create in a void.[9]

Swenson's career is characterized by such innovative formal inquiry as we see in "The Cross Spider"—what Alicia Ostriker terms Swenson's "exploratory forms" ("May Swenson and the Shapes of Speculation" 224)—as much as by its often edgy themes. It is the relation of the material world to the materiality of her poetry (the play of patterned shapes, the schisms she introduces between form and content, word and world) to which I want to turn now.

As Kirsten Zona recounts, when Swenson was asked about influences in her life, she "spoke most often of Moore," and central to her praise was the fact that Moore's work was rarely about self-expression and never about either "self-pity" or "self-aggrandizement" (MM 121–22). As Swenson makes clear in the following passage however it is not only Moore's self-restraint but also her formal quality that instructed Swenson: "[Moore] continues to teach us that poetry is not constructed with ideas or sensations or revelations or passions, though these are its seductive spots and glitters, but that instead it depends on a strong, limber, complex, organic trellis of technique—in short, it is made with *language*."[10] Swenson's constructivist insight about this "revolutionary of form" points to the fact

9. My thanks to Alicia Ostriker for reading an earlier draft of this essay and raising questions in an email about my explication of "The Cross Spider"; her questions were crucial to revising this section. "It seems to me that Arabella here is being manipulated by NASA into trying to create poetry in a void—and she fails, and dies," Ostriker remarked. "So NASA might stand for New Criticism or New Critical ideas that a poem is a pure object in space unconnected to poet or audience."
10. From *Made with Words* (hereafter *MWW*), 88.

that the creative ground of Moore's poetry is its dislodging of the connection between meaning and poetic material, which Moore accomplished by means of syllabic patterning that distributed the words in relation to theme arbitrarily rather than in coordination.[11]

It is something analogous to this function in Swenson's work that I've tried to tease out in my discussions of "The Centaur" and "The Cross Spider"—a more disjunctive, technical aspect of her poetry that I term *logopoetic materiality*. *Logopoetic*, of course, alludes to Pound's third kind of poetry (*melopoeia*, built on sound, and *phanopoeia*, built on image, being the other two), which Pound defines as "the dance of the intellect among words" (Pound 25). But Rachel Blau DuPlessis points out that *logopoeia* was the term Pound initially developed, as it happens, with Marianne Moore's (and Mina Loy's) cerebral, analytic, and archly ironic, even antilyric poetry in mind. His notion of logopoeia has been critically reinterpreted to signify the attempt to bring into poetry a diagnostic element, with some of the thick social analysis evident in the prose of such realist novelists as Flaubert and James. But, DuPlessis contends, following Carolyn Burke, we should recall that Moore's logopoetic poetry was written from "the subject position of the New Woman" (albeit without identifying poetic subjects as such—a withholding that women poets of Swenson's generation followed as well). Moore's work questioned and subverted (or inverted and involuted) the "gender assumptions" of the genre—the often triangulated, heterosexual "master plots" embedded in the lyric ideologically (DuPlessis, "Corpses of Poesy," 77).[12]

Swenson has been justly celebrated for her daring, formal experiments with the materiality of poetry, which extend Moore's own logopoetic investigations, but as with Moore, in order fully to appreciate the Swensonian "dance of the intellect among words," I think it is crucial to place her poetics in a materialist, cultural reading. To give an example, the poem "Bleeding" is a complex interface of textual, thematic, and material elements, which seems to conform to New Criticism's call for the aesthetic object's autonomy from context.[13] First collected in Swenson's most

11. In *Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions*, Bonnie Costello writes that Moore's syllabic "measure works independently of statement, allowing statement its own order while establishing a new order in which words are liberated from syntax" (181).

12. See also Carolyn Burke's foundational essay on Moore's and Loy's gender and genre innovation, "Getting Spliced," 98–121. For extensive feminist analyses of how Moore's work undercuts the inherited, gender fictions in the lyric, see, for example, Cristanne Miller, *Marianne Moore*, and Cynthia Hogue, "Less Is Moore."

13. See, for example, Swenson's New Critical response to a question about "poets interpreting their poems": "I think the poem should be autonomous and should explain itself" (*MWW* 117).

formally radical book, *Iconographs*, “Bleeding” is a sadomasochist fable about relational and yet paradoxically detached violence (a detachment that the poem’s own autonomy from circumstance might be said to make visible).[14] The pattern is epitomized by an unfeeling and destructive knife on the one hand and a self-hating, self-blaming cut on the other. The poem is structured as an allegorical conversation between the knife and the cut that at first seems almost predictably gendered. As Ostriker observes, however, although the “dry superiority to feeling is a major sign of desirable masculinity,” and both “bleeding” and “feeling” have long been culturally associated with “natural” femininity, what’s striking about this poem is that it’s careful not to propose a gender-specific narrative. Rather, it investigates, as Ostriker puts it, “a universal form of sickness.”[15]

The “knife” is an empiricist who feels only what it can confirm tactically (“I feel a little wetness still said the knife sinking in”),[16] but the knife is unconcerned with the consequences of its actions. The “cut” is a cognitively dissociative metaphysician who only thinks it knows what it feels when it’s in pain (“I feel I have to bleed to feel I think said the cut.”).[17] Although the word “feel” occurs three times in the lines I’ve just quoted, each time the connotation is different: the knife’s use of “feel” indicates sensory perception (I feel wetness); the cut’s first use of “feel” is analogous to “think,” whereas the second occurrence seems to mean emotional feeling. As such, the aural patterning of repeated sounds (mainly the long-vowelled, plosive combination of “bleed” and “bleeding,” contrasted with the softer, short-vowelled combinations of “messy” and “wet”) comprises something of a compulsion for textual repetition.

Visually mirroring the knife’s (dis)association from the wound, the typographic, jagged “gash” runs down the course of the poem on the page, disrupting its smooth, poetic surface and introducing gaps in the lines into which meaning accrues. It is the very absence of connection that

14. May Swenson, *Iconographs* (hereafter, *I*), 13.

15. See also Zona’s response to “Bleeding”; she describes the poem as an “obvious” critical commentary “on gender inequality and heterosexist desire” (*SR* 123).

16. The irony of this unfeeling “feeling” is underscored even more in *TTP*, in which Swenson included a revised version of “Bleeding.” In the later version, the break in that line occurs earlier, and the gap between the parts of the line has widened: “I feel a little   wetness still said the knife sinking in” (*TTP* 104). Swenson significantly revises this poem by typographically reconfiguring the “gash,” a technique she surely learned from Moore, who among published versions of the same poem could radically revise a poem without changing one word, simply by redistributing the syllabics.

17. This line, too, is revised significantly in the later version to emphasize a sense of compulsion, which seems internalized, “I feel I have to   bleed to feel I think said the cut” (*TTP* 104).

the typographic, linear disconnection ironically emphasizes. As the verbal repetitions imply, meaning shifts with context even if the words don't change. There are limits to what we can comprehend in language, as well as to what we can know by means of our senses: the knife and the cut are in conversational relation but not in real communication. As too often with those on one side or the other of debates about violence, the knife and the cut may be literally on the same page but they are clearly not in the same experiential, ontological paradigm.

The dynamics of violence may seem, as we contemplate history, both universally human and timeless, but I want to suggest that Swenson's analysis in this poem is socially and temporally specific. Swenson discussed the poems in *Iconographs* as "visual metaphors," in which she was "trying to find a pattern, or have a vision, the power of the unconscious" (*MWW* 116). I've been performing a very close reading of "Bleeding" in order to suggest speculatively that the visual metaphor it constructs is of a country divided literally over the issue of violence (much, I might add, like our country today over Iraq). From the "power of the unconscious" the text accesses through its patterns of repetition—bleed, bleed, wet, wet, mess, mess, blood, stop, come out, sink in, coming out, sinking in, stop, stop, feel, feel, little, little—emerges a nexus of insistent perceptions, what we might call *felt-thoughts*: stop sinking in; stop the bleeding; stop the wet (Vietnam War); feel little (I would gloss this double-taking phrase as an invocation to *feel humble*).

My point here is not that Swenson is writing an antiwar poem as overtly as her contemporary Robert Lowell, but that the poem is more complex and multileveled than a gendered explication elicits. "Bleeding" contemplates the phenomenon of violence, investigating the mentality that makes it possible. "Bleeding" so insistently recirculates the same words in differing contexts that the repetition uncovers verbal ploys, the psychology of which the poem exposes: circular reasoning to justify unconscionable action, disassociation that permits the knife not only to continue wounding, but also not to "know" that it is wounding the cut, and the general confusion of feeling for thinking most evident around issues of violence and war. In the emotional intensification that repetition both signifies and generates, we can decipher the fraught trace of the materialist context. To bring that trace into awareness, I have been following the tracks of repeated words that occur in textual but not contextual specificity, allowing a historically situated reading to emerge. DuPlessis advocates such a close reading practice, terming it "social philology," which

entails tracking in the poetry semantic and phonemic slippages, phonic counterplays, buried puns, and double-taking phrases, among other poetic practices, in order to apprehend the connection between the author's intention ("psychology") and the "social history" of the "author's location" (*Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures* 24–25 and 1–28, passim).

Iconographs was published in 1970, a time of great social upheaval and protest: in full swing were the civil-rights movement and second-wave feminism, as well as a nascent gay-rights movement that Stonewall signaled—the first militant gay protest of inequity, which erupted in 1969 in Greenwich Village, where Swenson lived; her cultural surroundings resonate in the double-take on "coming out" in the poem. All of this was taking place during a time when there were huge protests of the Vietnam War. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bobby Kennedy had both been assassinated in 1968. That Swenson deeply felt and considered the impact of their loss and the violence of their assassinations, including the implications of King's loss for the civil-rights movement, is confirmed by the two elegies she wrote for them, "Black Tuesday" and "The Lowering," on facing pages in *Iconographs*. Much of the first section of the collection, in fact, ranges across various references to and contemplations of current events—for example, of the "space race," the draft, and above-ground nuclear testing (in "The Shape of Death," "white blossom belches" from a "pillared cloud" bursting with "sickly black" ashes [*I* 27]).[18] Although she would shift its placement in *Things Taking Place* eight years later, Swenson's placement of "Bleeding" as the threshold poem in a collection published at the end of a violent and tumultuous decade resonates with the "power of the unconscious"—its way of knowing, its dreamlike powers to work through—that she tries to access through this shape-shifting logopoetics.

Iconographs also suggests that Swenson was conversant with an avant-garde movement the center of which was shifting, because of the rise of fascism in Europe, from Paris to New York around the time that Swenson was herself moving to New York from Utah in the 1930s. Knudson and Bigelow tell us that there she met intellectual émigré artists (Anzia Yezierska, among others), worked for the Federal Writers' Project, and soon also met one of Marianne Moore's great supporters, the wealthy editor and

18. This contextualizing summary, which began as mere speculation about Swenson's political engagement, was confirmed at the 2004 May Swenson Symposium at Utah State University by Knudson, who remarked that Swenson "often spoke of politics with [unnamed friend]," and that her elegies for Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., among other political poems in *Iconographs*, stemmed from a deeply felt sense of political engagement.

writer Alfred Kreymborg (who would be instrumental in helping Swenson as well). Generally she began finding her way to a community that included an artistic and intellectual gay subculture and proletariat and expressionist artists. In the 1950s and 1960s, Swenson worked as a manuscript reader at the premier publisher of the avant-garde, New Directions, which was bringing out books by modernist, objectivist, and Black Mountain poets. Thus, she may have read materialist-minded poets like objectivist George Oppen, who began, after a twenty-year hiatus, to write and publish with New Directions throughout the 1960s. Swenson herself had already published in the *New Directions* magazine in the 1950s with fellow second-generation modernists Lorine Niedecker and Kenneth Rexroth, as well as with one of the "founding fathers" of modernism, William Carlos Williams, among others.

Always interested in modernist collage, Swenson allowed her work to open to the accidental or incidental in ways that other mainstream poets did not. She writes in her afterword to *Iconographs*, "To have material and mold evolve together and become a symbiotic whole. To cause an instant object-to-eye encounter with each poem even before it is read word-after-word. To have simultaneity as well as sequence. To make an existence in space, as well as in time, for the poem. These have been, I suppose, the impulses behind the typed shapes and frames invented for this collection" (*I* 86).

The improvisational moment of visual and aural perception suggests not only a familiarity with the younger New York School poets, abstract expressionism, and action painting (while her experiments with electronic sound recordings at Purdue indicate at least a passing interest in John Cage), but also a contemplation of the first-generation avant garde (cubism, Dadaism) that was investigating through art such discoveries in science as Einstein's theory of relativity. Swenson never aligned herself with the avant garde, but she infused some of its techniques and concerns into her own work and shared its interest in perspectival simultaneity of moment and sequence, as well as the creative possibilities (and dangers) generated by technology.[19]

I want to close by examining an example of this interest at some length. Swenson's poem "The DNA Molecule" is a response to James Watson's bestselling account of the discovery of DNA structure, *The*

19. Like so many aspects of Swenson's work, her approach to science and technology has yet to receive full critical consideration, but see, for example, Richard Howard, "Banausics," 423–42, for a reading of Swenson's poem "August 19, Pad 19," that raises the issue thematically.

THE DNA MOLECULE
THE DNA MOLECULE
THE DNA MOLECULE
is The Nude Descending a Staircase
a circular one.
See the undersurfaces
of the spiral
treads and
the spaces
in between.

She is descending and at the same time
ascending and she moves around herself. For
she is the staircase "a protoplasmic framework
an internal scaffolding
that twists and turns."

She is a double helix mounting and dismounting
around the swivel of her imaginary spine. The Nude
named DNA can be constructed as a model with matches and
a ribbon of tape. Be sure to use only 4 colors on 2 white
strands of twistable tape. "Only matches of complementary
colors may be placed opposite each other. The pairs
are to be red and green and yellow and blue."

Make your model as high as the Empire
State Building and you have an acceptable
replica of The Nude.
But and this is harder you must make her move
in a continuous coil
an alpha helix a double spiral
downward and upward at once
and you must make her increase while at the same
time occupying the same field.
She must be made "to maintain a basic topography"
changing yet remaining stable

if she is to perform her function which is to produce
and reproduce the microsphere.
Such a sphere is invisible to but ominpresent
in the naked eye of The Nude.
It contains "a central region and an outer membrane"
making it able to divide "to make exact copies of
itself without limit."

The Nude has "the capacity for
replication and transcription" of
all genesis. She ingests and
regurgitates the genetic material
it being the material of her own
cell-self. From single she becomes
double and from double single.

As a woman ingests the demon sperm and with the same membrane
regurgitates the mitotic double of herself upon the

slide of time so the DNA
MOLECULE produces with a little
pop at the waistline of its viscous drop
a new microsphere the same size
as herself which proceeds singly to grow
in order to divide and double itself.
So from single to double and double to single and

mounting while descending she
expands while contracts she proliferates while
disappearing at both of her ends.

Remember that red can only be opposite green
and blue opposite yellow. Remember that the
complementary pairs of matches must differ slightly in
length "for nature's pairs can be made only with units
whose structures permit an interplay of forces
between the partners."

I fixed a blue match opposite a red
match of the same length
in defiance of the rules pointed them
away from the center on the double-stranded
tape. I saw laid a number of eggs

on eggs on the sticky side of a twig.
I saw a worm with many feet grow out
of an egg.

The worm climbed the twig a single helix and gobbled
the magnified edge of a leaf
in quick enormous bites.

It then secreted out of itself a gray floss
with which it wrapped itself tail first and so on
until it had completely muffled
and encased itself head last as in a mummy pouch.

I saw plushy irridescent wings push
moistly out of the pouch. At first glued
together they began to part. On each wing

I saw a large blue eye
open forever in the expression of resurrection.
The new Nude released the flanges
of her wings
stretching herself to touch

at all points
the outermost rim
of the noösphere.

I saw that for her body from which the
wings expanded
she had retained
the worm.

(*Icongraphs* 23–24)

Double Helix, which was published in 1968, brief quotations from which are collaged into the poem. But the poem visually and linguistically associates its contemplation of genetics with the classic Cubist painting of the great Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase*.[20] The version in *Iconographs* typographically mimes the multiperspectival, Cubist fracturing of the woman (in the poem, into stanzaic shards placed at acute angles to each other).

The text supplements the original painting by making a conceptual (but not interpretive) association of The Nude's figural representation with the spiral shape of DNA's double helix. "The DNA Molecule / is The Nude Descending a Staircase," the poem announces in its opening, a grammatical structure of likeness and definition that does not constitute an actual relation of similarity, but adroitly mixes and confuses categories of aesthetic and physiological structures.

Unless we think sculpturally, spatially. Then we can see, the poem insouciantly continues, that The Nude "is the staircase," for though she is called by what she lacks (clothes, in this instance), she is identified by her movement through space (she is simultaneously descending and ascending a staircase). "The Nude / named DNA can be constructed," however, since *woman* as object of the male gaze is a construction in Western aesthetic history. But only if you "Make your model as high as the Empire / State Building" will you have "an acceptable / replica of The Nude." Acceptable to whom? we might ask, and on what grounds? With such spiraling twists of perspectives, the poem circles around issues of aesthetic and physiological materialism, the status of The Nude as reproductive and as *a* reproduction: "The Nude has 'the capacity for / replication and transcription.'" She is, as these lines make brilliantly clear, a figure of gynetic, generative writing as well as genetic coding, where she has transcriptively generated "the material of her own / cell-self" (*I* 23). Put in the context of poststructuralist feminism, this revisionary figure of *woman* is the "Newly Born Woman" (Cixous and Clément).

Thus dividing, she doubles, paradoxically both present and absent (like the self "upon // the slide of time") in a way that art anticipatorily imagines and quantum physics explains: "mounting while descending she / expands while contracts she proliferates while / disappearing" (*I* 24). Becoming herself in the course of evolution thus entails transforming quite literally in the course of the poetic text not only into an-other genetic

20. Swenson had a long history of interest and involvement in the visual arts, and as Knudson and Bigelow tell us, she even played chess with Duchamp at MacDowell in the 1950s (MS 42–45, 62).

species, but also into another genre. Abruptly, the text returns (or spirals away from, involutes) to an earlier moment in which the poem seemed at turns like a "how-to manual" (giving directions for building a DNA model), moments interrupted by the modernist collage and bricolage of quotation. Toward the end of the poem, the text returns to the notion of building a model, but this time shifts into a personal narrative, the *you* building the model becoming an observer watching "a worm" wrap itself up in a "mummy pouch." The poetic subject is introduced (in order to testify to the metamorphic process?) at the same time as the new species emerges from the chrysalis into the poem. The "new Nude" that has emerged seems capable of being not only object but subject, not only body but mind, for she bears on each wing "a large blue eye / open forever in the expression of resurrection," and she stretches "herself to touch // at all points / the outermost rim / of the noösphere. "The new Nude is not reconstructed (replicated) but resurrected (both genetically and generically), for the speaker sees "that for her body from which the / wings expanded / she had retained / the worm" (*I* 24). She is, we might say, not *newly born* but *reborn*. Although Swenson is careful to keep the visual focus in the poem on the observable texture of the world without offering much comment or interpretation, this "worm" bears all the signs of symbolizing the *self* or *soul* of Western metaphysical and spiritual traditions. Swenson tells us in her afterword that in addition to attempting to orchestrate differing, temporal modes of apprehension (the "instant object-to-eye encounter" that would precede reading "word-after-word"), *Iconographs* was influenced in part by the "sacred mathematics" of medieval religious iconography. Its exploratory investigations of visual poetics were conducted "in order to make the mind re-member . . . the Grain—the buried grain of language on which depends the transfer and expansion of consciousness" (*I* 86, 87).

The expansion that Swenson had in mind was a kind of Teilhardian vision of hope for earth through the evolution of thinking, a notion I want to suggest by following two Teilhardian words that I've quoted above because they occur in "The DNA Molecule" and in the afterword—"noösphere" and "Grain." Swenson would have been reading Pierre Teilhard de Chardin around the same time as she was reading about the discovery of DNA's double helix, for his works were published posthumously and translated into English editions throughout the 1960s. Teilhard, who was a Jesuit paleontologist, termed his notion of cerebral evolution *noögenesis* (a neologism based on the Greek word for mind, *noos*), to contrast it with *biogenesis* (the evolution of organisms of increasing complexity and adaptability on earth). He theorized that the earth was "not only

becoming covered by myriads of grains of thought, but becoming enclosed in a single thinking envelope, a single unanimous reflection."[21] Teilhard called the new cerebralism he optimistically envisioned, which is a capacity for reflection and self-knowledge, the *noösphere*. Swenson's version is characteristically witty and more corporeally cognizant: Teilhard's "thinking envelope" becomes "a mummy pouch" in the poem. The "grains of thought" have become, equally characteristically, poetically active: "the Grain—the buried grain of language" is the iconographic poem that makes "the mind re-member."

Teilhard developed his ideas following his horrific experience as a stretcher-bearer in WWI, and as I've proposed earlier, Swenson, who was contemplating in some of the poems of *Iconographs* the psychology of violence in a violent decade, may have found his thinking resonant. That trace words from his thought occur in *Iconographs* suggests that Swenson may have had healing "visions" in mind as she conceptualized the collection. Teilhard argued that for humans to transcend our baser nature and end war, we were going to have to evolve cerebrally. We were going to have to develop "the power acquired by a consciousness to turn it upon itself, to take possession of itself as of an object endowed with its own particular consistence and value: no longer merely to know, but to know oneself; no longer merely to know but to know that one knows" (Cunningham 165). Teilhard called the time in which humans would evolve to such a state the "Omega Point," both the final stage of evolution and a time in which barriers preventing unity and peace on earth might be surmounted. He stated that although space and time seem separate, they are "necessarily of a convergent nature"— "space-time," in other words—"Because [space-time] contains and engenders consciousness, . . . [and] must somewhere in the future become involuted to a point which we might call omega, which fuses and consumes them integrally in itself" (Cunningham 259). Something approximating this process is what produces The New Nude in Swenson's poem.

That is, the involution that Teilhard describes is analogous to the movements The Nude named DNA performs as she descends the spiral staircase of genetic coding, secreting around herself the mummy pouch and then emerging as The New Nude of the Omega Point. Having fused space with time while in the cocoon, she is able *after coming out* to touch "the outermost rim / of the noösphere" when she spread her wings (the

21. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*; qtd. in Rev. Phillip J. Cunningham, "Teilhard de Chardin and the Noösphere." All of what I paraphrase and quote from Teilhard is from Cunningham's article.

double-taking connotations of which I want to note via italics). Are we to take this vision seriously? Hasn't Swenson's writing seemed too full of hijinx earlier in the poem for us to take her as seriously visionary here at the end? Swenson's playful wit functions like the Dadaist *blagues* of which she allusively reminds us, and like the Dadaists (whose movement arose like Teilhard's ideas after experiencing the horrors of WWI), her jokes have serious import. Her poetry is trying to remold thought and change minds, I want to suggest in closing, to make things happen—visibly—with words: to transfer and expand consciousness, and in turn, to turn the buried grains of language, we might say, into pearls of wisdom.