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Body My House

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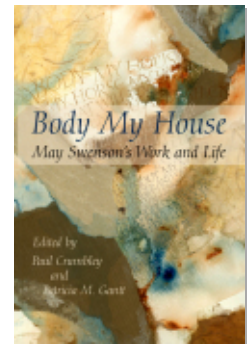
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HOW EVERYTHING HAPPENS

Notes on May Swenson's Theory of Writing

Michael Spooner

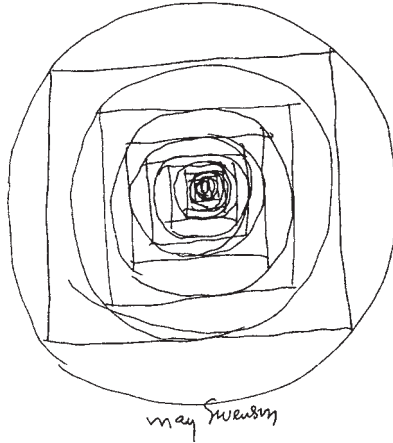
“Notes,” because I don’t want to construe May Swenson as a writing theorist, or even as one who cared much about writing as a field of study. As far as I know, it was never her purpose to study “the composing process” as such; her purpose was to compose. Still, any writer does invoke a theory of writing—a tacit one, an idiosyncratic one—and in fact, though it may not have been her purpose to develop a systematic theory of writing, she clearly did think deeply about her own composing process. In addition, May Swenson was inclined and was called upon, as most writers are, from time to time, to explain herself. She left traces of her explanations in certain places for us to find, and I think we can understand her work and genius a little better if we study some of the ideas about writing that she herself found useful. We can find a representative sample of these in the collection of poems she committed not to print but to LP in her 1976 Caedmon recording, *The Poetry and Voice of May Swenson*. Each poem I’ll study in this chapter is included on that recorded collection, along with a brief commentary by the poet on each, just as she might have delivered it before a live audience in a Greenwich Village café. In these poems and these comments, we get a fairly clear picture of May Swenson’s theory of knowledge—at least what it was in the mid-1970s—and through it, we glimpse something of her theory of writing.

SELF-PORTRAIT

Many years ago, to amuse bartenders and young women, I learned to caricature myself on cocktail napkins. It took only a stroke or two of the

pen: high forehead, beak nose, thinning hair, moustache. I didn't wear glasses then. There's something about a caricature, some vandalistic joy. And though mockery of someone else is always fun, self-mockery is a delightful double entendre—the distortion appealingly humble, the artfulness a silent boast. Toulouse-Lautrec is all the grander for exaggerating his small stature in *Moulin Rouge*.

When she was invited to contribute to a book called *Self-Portrait: Book People Picture Themselves* (Britton), May Swenson offered the following.



“Damn,” you can hear the other contributors muttering. “Wish I’d thought of that.” Where others in the book “pictured” themselves—wart, eyebrow, tooth, and nose—the one thing Swenson didn’t give us is a visage. She gave the circle and the square. A literally self-effacing gesture, yet in this self-effacement, she transcended the prompt “picture yourself,” doodling us into a *trompe l’oeil* of the self that is at once more enigmatic and more revealing. As she did so often in her poems, Swenson employed two quite simple, deliberately childlike tropes: circle and square. “Aw shucks” they seem to say. “I’m just a cowgirl in the city. Well-rounded but still a little square.” And, of course, it’s the tension between them that she wanted us to see. They are not just a circle and a square; they are a circle *within* a square *within* a circle *within* a square *within* a circle, and it is the tension and repetition between these simple geometric forms that gives “Self-Portrait” its telescoping illusion.

As she reminds us in her poem “The Wonderful Pen,” May Swenson is bold enough to show herself, her mind, but she doesn’t need to spell everything out. “I have a wonderful mind: / Inventive. It is / for you to find. Read me. Read my mind” (Riverside CA, 1973).

If we read her mind, the simple, shy, self-deprecating shapes of “Self-Portrait” become an icon of infinite depth. We might say she is of two minds, even, and this is what I’ll argue about her theory of writing. In so many of her poems and her commentaries, Swenson offers us an idea suspended between two poles.

KNOWLEDGE ACHIEVED/KNOWLEDGE RECEIVED

Swenson introduces her Caedmon LP with these words: “There is knowledge achieved through mental effort and knowledge received through instinct or by way of the subconscious. Many of my poems, it has seemed to me after their birth, are attempts to record received knowledge” (*The Poetry and Voice of May Swenson*). It is difficult to capture her spoken rhythm on the page—she pauses meaningfully after “achieved” and “received,” as if she intends punctuation there, where none is called for. If we line it out differently, her sense becomes clearer:

There is knowledge achieved
 through mental effort
 and knowledge received
 through instinct
 or by way of the subconscious.

Printed this way, one hears the implicit “that is,” the silent “i.e.” that she delivers by vocal inflection after each of her categories of knowledge. And how categorical she is here. I love the confident modernism of her formula; how impossible such a stance has become in our fragmented post-modern time. Born in 1913, May Swenson reflects here and elsewhere the mid-twentieth-century persuasion of scientific rationalism. She believes in progress, science, reason, and form.

“Knowledge achieved by . . . effort.” It should be written with a capital E, as her dry Utah accent also speaks to me of pioneer Effort, the backbreaking work of hopeful immigrants in an arid land. If you know the American West, you know how powerfully that motif still moves the imagination here, in spite of how we temper it nowadays with a more clear-eyed revisionist history. Every place has its ethos, and ours was built on the religion of self-reliance and the idolatry of progress. W. H. D. Korrner’s *Madonna of the Prairie* is still the image that many westerners hold in their hearts. (If you don’t know this one, it’s a tender portrait in oils of a young pioneer wife perched on the seat of a Conestoga—yes, framed

by the round outline of the canvas wagon cover. Her soulful eye and haloed brow glowed most popularly from the cover of a Zane Grey novel.) We find effort, too, enshrined in the doctrine of “perfectibility”—the idea that one may achieve perfection in the afterlife through good works in the present one. This is among the official myths of the Latter-day Saints (and some other Christian groups). I mention these two particular valences of effort because May Swenson’s parents were not only immigrants to the West but were also Mormon converts. She is the product, I am saying, of a place and a people conceived in effort.

I think we can see rationalism as basic even in the more transcendent category of “knowledge received,” because although she allows it, she assigns it straightaway to animal instinct (a Darwinian gesture) or to the subconscious. And it is the *subconscious*—Freud’s term—she employs here, not the mystical *unconscious* of Jung. Though not all knowledge is achievable rationally, Swenson seems to say, the mind is after all knowable and can be rationally explained. And by stipulating the “received” as a category of knowledge—one of only two categories, in fact—she neatly achieves an idea that might in other hands be completely inaccessible to reason.

Still, as a poet, May Swenson cannot be completely intellectual; that is, she cannot ignore the long tradition of the Muse, from whom so many poets have said they receive. She resists it, though, I think. “Knowledge received through instinct” is resistance to the Romantic tradition, at least as that tradition sees itself in Coleridge and Byron, in Wordsworth and his vacant musing. There is no priesthood of the imagination for her, because instinct is natural, not supernatural—perhaps mysterious, but never mystical. One hears Rousseau, however, when she considers the green freedom of the natural world, as she does in “The Centaur” and other poems. In lines like “body my house / my horse, my hound” from “Question,” she confines the mind clearly within the rambunctious body, the natural body that must someday fall. Fallible, physical, the body is the site and source of instinct; its knowledge is received upward from the earth. Swenson left religion behind when she set out for the big city. Was her leaving, in part, a rational flight from heavenly knowledge, a reversal of the received/achieved balance as practiced by a faith community deeply invested in prophetic revelation? One wonders if this could be part of why she’s willing to receive only through instinct or the subconscious. Or perhaps she means “instinct” and the “subconscious” in the way that Henri Bergson means “intuition”—a nonreligious revelation, a *nonrational* but not *irrational* faculty of mind. Either way, it seems that she is re-visioning inspiration as a category of knowledge within the reach of reason.

I don't want to leave it there, however, because although Swenson was agnostic in adulthood, she never lost interest in the numinous. In fact, she wrote enough poems on religious subjects to suggest a separate collection, though one has never been compiled. Accordingly, we should not miss the religious resonance in "knowledge received." It is not only conservative religious traditions that teach a knowledge accessible by a path beyond the ken of reason. Pascal reminds us that when reason is exhausted, the reasonable thing is to open the mind to faith; Kierkegaard anticipates the postmodern when he argues that Hegelian objectivity is impossible (and fruitless). And though with "instinct" and "subconscious" Swenson does resist a Wordsworthian muse, she still harks back to the Romantic tradition, where the poem descends upon the poet, who more or less channels it: "Many of my poems, it has seemed to me after their birth, are attempts to record received knowledge." A word is *born*, knowledge is *received* and *recorded*. Bearing in mind the poet's background, it is impossible to hear this language and not to hear the *Gospel According to John* and *The Book of Mormon*. Swenson's theory of written invention here is deeply informed by the image of the writer meditating alone, with the poem settling onto the page like the Word of the Lord. There is knowledge received and there is knowledge revealed.

SEEING THROUGH EVERYTHING

Let's briefly consider three poems that Swenson specifically identifies as "received." If you can get any recording of her reading these, it will add depth. So many poets read so badly that, except out of morbid curiosity, one almost prefers not to ruin the poem with their delivery. But Swenson took much care in her presentations. Whether from nerves or simply a strong work ethic, she rehearsed often and conscientiously, spending long hours with her poems and a tape recorder. You can be sure that when you hear her reading formally, you are hearing a carefully prepared performance. On the Caedmon recording, Swenson provides a word of introduction to each poem that she reads, as she would do before a live audience. She supplies a brief one here:

This half-serious, half-comic wish poem, called "The Pure Suit of Happiness," has a pun in the title.

The Pure Suit of Happiness

The pure suit of happiness,
not yet invented. How I long
to climb into its legs,

fit into its sleeves, and zip
it up, pull the hood
over my head. It's got

a face mask, too, and gloves
and boots attached. It's
made for me. It's blue. It's

not too heavy, not too
light. It's my right.
It has its own weather,

which is youth's breeze,
equilibrated by the ideal
thermostat of maturity,

and built in, to begin with,
fluoroscopic goggles of
age. I'd see through

everything, yet be happy.
I'd be suited for life. I'd
always look good to myself.

[Sea Cliff, 1971]

In a way that reminds me of “achieved” versus “received,” the poet keeps opposites interacting in this poem. The poem is half-serious, half-comic, she says by way of introduction. In the text, she repeats: it is not too heavy (serious), not too light (comic). Though its substance is happiness, nevertheless it's blue. Youth and maturity, too. Interestingly, though youth is more often figured as a source of heat (signifying impulse or passion), Swenson instead associates it with a cold breeze needing the warmth of maturity to moderate it. Slipping into the pure suit/pursuit, the poem's speaker will be suited (both clothed and prepared) for life. Through the goggles of age, she will look good to herself. The word play throughout is so obvious that one can only surmise she is teasing when she forewarns us that it's “half-serious, half-comic” and “has a pun in the title.”

In spite of the binaries, the poet is most interested in moderation. She desires the invigorating breeze of youth, but tells us that a suitable happiness is achieved only when that cool breeze is tempered by maturity's thermostat. With the goggles of age, even maturity is extended or qualified. The goggles, we're told, are "built in to begin with"; the redundancy weakens the poem, but emphasizes how fundamental is the perspective that comes with age. The poet suggests here that without age, happiness is perhaps blind—unable to "see through everything" or even to see the good in oneself.

For our purposes, what's interesting is that in the "Pure Suit," and in the goggles particularly, we see again a speaker who believes in a knowable, stable reality. She wants to "see through everything"—more precisely, to see through appearances to the true shapes of everything. Almost as an aside, she adds "yet be happy," as if what is to be seen will necessarily be a disappointment—a common view from eyes of age. Thus, the goggles of age become the crucial equipment here. Through them, the poet's ironic technology gives access to "reality," allowing one to achieve knowledge of what lies on the other side of appearance.

Up to this point, we almost forget that Swenson described "The Pure Suit" as a "received" poem. Yet here at the end, I find myself nodding, because at least in these my middle years, happiness seems a dawning irony—more of a received gift than an achieved state. A way of seeing, indeed, a perception for which I wasn't suited in earlier years.

MAY OUT WEST

Here's another received poem. She introduces it herself, but notice what fun Swenson had with traditional images of the American West—deliberately conflated with images from LDS tradition. At the end, the poet smiles at herself and her own era.

In South Dakota one summer, on the way to Mount Rushmore, our car had to halt along with many others because a large herd of buffalo decided to cross the highway. At that point, watching in fascination while waiting, I began to receive this poem.

Bison Crossing Near Mount Rushmore

There is our herd of cars stopped,
staring respectfully at the line of bison crossing.

Michael Spooner

One big-fronted bull nudges his cow into a run.
She and her calf are the first to cross.

In swift dignity the dark-coated caravan sweeps through
the gap our cars leave in the two-way stall
on the road to the Presidents.

The polygamous bulls guarding their families from the rear,
the honey-brown calves trotting head-to-hip
by their mothers—who are lean and muscled as bulls,
with chin tassels and curved horns—
all leap the road like a river, and run.

The strong and somber remnant of western freedom
disappears into the rough grass of the draw,
around the point of the mountain.

The bison, orderly, disciplined by the prophet-faced,
heavy-headed fathers, threading the pass
of our awestruck stationwagons, airstreams and trailers,
if in dread of us give no sign,
go where their leaders twine them, over the prairie.

And we keep to our line,
staring, stirring, revving idling motors, moving
each behind the other, herdlike, where the highway leads.

[South Dakota, 1973]

If nostalgic images of the West arise in the mind, it is because the poet intends to raise them, of course. “[T]he strong and somber remnant of western freedom / disappears . . .” She deliberately invests the buffalo with the familiar nobility and romance, not to mention nostalgia, with which Americans have been describing them for more than 150 years—since about the time Americans began to exterminate them. The role of US government policy in their extermination makes the poem’s setting “on the road to the Presidents” especially ironic. In addition, as Swenson knows, human westerners are very fond of copping a pose as an endangered species, themselves. When not pandering to the tourist trade, they lament the decline of “the cowboy way,” the lost ethos of the “Old West,” or—where I’m from—of the “Golden Days” of the gold rush with its brutal, helter-skelter, winner-take-all version of “Western freedom.” All of these do point to a diminishing set of folkways and an identifiable regional culture, but one assumes that Swenson knew they were just as fitting a set of images for the devastation of bison herds and bison habitat as they were for human liberty. The poet sketches it in one or two strokes of the pen.

Add to this irony the Mormon allusions in the poem. The Mormons, of course, put down roots in the Mountain West when it was still claimed by Mexico, seeking their own freedom here to escape, as they see it, persecution back East. Like many other westerners, conservative LDS folk still tend to see change from traditional ways as a loss, and to this they often readily supply a religious tone. Swenson receives this tone, trapped in the two-way stall on the road to the presidents, and she swiftly associates the Mormon patriarchy with the disappearing West and the vanishing buffalo. Those disciplining, polygamous bulls go by—"the prophet-faced, heavy-headed fathers"—somberly caravanning their women and children into the sunset. Her word "remnant" now sounds its proper Old Testament notes; the herd of beasts and the herd of cars morph into Conestoga wagons, and one imagines the bearded face of Brigham Young nodding pensively over all.

With "Bison Crossing," we find another sense in which May Swenson wants to *see through* everything. She is much admired for her acuity with the senses, and one sees in this poem how well she deserves her reputation. The lines are plain, like her Mountain West accent on the Caedmon recording, and they gain everything for that; her associations are pointed, amusing, unerring. As Camille Paglia writes, "For her, the artist is not a better person, but one who makes us see better" (196). Swenson prefers descriptive or narrative realism over artful symbolism, yet she does seem to think symbolically. "She finds renewal and rebirth in the common and universal" (Paglia 196). Those shaggy beasts, who begin the poem as bison stopping tourists on the two-lane road, end the poem as emblems of our own certain uncertain destiny somewhere down the road—"where the highway leads." The poet shows us our lives, in Paglia's phrase, "as a mazy journey with no goal but itself" (196). We will notice this symbolic turn of mind again below, and it suggests that she really does see . . . through everything. She sharpens our perception of the nonphysical by bringing the physical so sharply to our senses—in her own terms.

RECEIVING TRANCES

May Swenson traveled to the Southwest more than once, and some of my favorite Swenson poems were written about subjects she encountered there. Here is what she says about the poem we now know as "A Navajo Blanket":

“In Navajoland” is a trance poem of mine about color—in this case, the pure color and dazzling pattern of a Navajo Indian blanket which I came upon in Tucson, Arizona. Some 200 years ago, this beautiful, primitive, practical work of art was woven by a woman of the Navajo tribe, of threads dyed with earth colors, berry inks, animal blood—an object produced for warmth, for use. At the same time, because designed and made by the hands of a natural artist, there is permanent gladness in contemplating its craft and beauty.

In Navajoland

Eye-dazzlers the Indians weave. Three colors
are paths that pull you in and pin you
to the maze. Brightness makes your eyes jump,
surveying the geometric field. Alight, and enter
any of the gates—of Blue, of Red, of Black.
Be calmed and hooded, a hawk jerked down,
glad to fasten to the forearm of a Chief.

You can sleep at the center,
attended by Sun that never fades, by Moon
that cools. Then, slipping free of zigzag and
hypnotic diamond, find your way out
by the spirit trail, a faint Green thread that
secretly crosses the border, where your mind
is rinsed and returned to you like a white cup.

[Tucson, 1974–75; title later revised to “A Navajo Blanket”]

The later print version differs very slightly. In fact, the later title is better, since “Navajoland” is actually some three hundred miles to the northeast of Tucson. In addition, today, we might dispute some of her anthropology. Terms like “primitive,” “tribe,” “chief,” and “natural artist” are not as easy to ignore as they used to be. We know that twentieth-century Navajos didn’t weave blankets for warmth so much as for trade. And finally, there is no tradition of falconry, as far as I know, among the Navajos. However, these issues don’t involve the poem’s substance, and in the 1970s, few American poetry readers would find any of this exceptionable.

The importance of the poem is Swenson’s interest in the mind. She calls it a “trance poem,” in that peculiar way poets have of assigning genres.

(You'll recall that "Pure Suit" was a "wish poem.") From her first word, "eye-dazzlers," the poem opens into a meditative state, and the weave she extends line by line describes a blanket pattern that indeed could have suggested a trance. A "maze" was perhaps originally more a puzzle than a prayer, but in modern usage it has become synonymous with "labyrinth," the classic aid to reflection and meditation in a number of cultures, and this is how Swenson is using the term too.¹ A space for spacing out.

"You can sleep at the center," the poet tells us. Through sleep, we enter the land of dreams, a province everywhere associated with knowledge received. In "the center," as well, we find the poet's most successful intuition, since centering and balance are vital themes to the Navajos, as they are to many other First Nations cultures. Navajos associate both beauty and mental health explicitly with harmony. Traditional Navajos even today may undertake week-long ceremonies of fasting, feasting, singing, and meditation to cleanse a life and restore it to balance. In this light, the poem's closing image becomes even more vivid. This is the state toward which the poem line by line moves—the state of the mind emerging from such an experience, from such a trance—and it is well-pictured as an emptied, rinsed, white cup. On the Caedmon recording, Swenson relates this state of mind to the title of her book *Half Sun Half Sleep*: "the primitive bipolar suspension in which my poems often begin to form." She is much invested in such a state, because that balance between waking and the world of dream is the state of consciousness one must achieve, as any prophet knows, before one can hear the still small voice of received knowledge.

DEAR ELIZABETH

May Swenson left a considerable body of work in what she came to call "iconographic" formats, and it's fairly clear from her earliest experimentations that her arrangement of type on the page was deliberate, calculated, and effortful. Whereas "the poem"—its words—may have been received knowledge, the shape of things on the page was an achieved effect. She

1. On the other hand, I don't believe the Navajos have such a tradition. One of the more familiar maze patterns in southwestern Native American traditional arts is the "Man in a Maze" pattern of the Tohono O'odham, which is not used in the European manner as an aid to meditation. It is said, rather, to symbolize life and choice, the search for balance, the path of a human being through life—and, more originally, perhaps, the Tohono O'odham creation/emergence story. But Swenson is not expounding cultural material here or claiming the maze for the Navajos, so much as she is responding to it from personal impressions.

will later work up this intuition into an explicit statement of technique, but even by 1953, in her correspondence with Elizabeth Bishop, we find an exchange that reveals something of Swenson's early approach to unconventional typography. Just prior to this exchange, she had shared with Bishop a draft in which she abandoned punctuation. Bishop was not impressed. "Contemporary French poetry often does what you do . . . and it is purely annoying. I think if you intend to write only poems that can be . . . understood without punctuation you are limiting yourself rather disastrously" (letter July 1953). Here is the danger of the avant garde, isn't it? Even those whom we might reasonably expect to understand what we're about can let us down. In response, Swenson offered an explanation that Bishop really shouldn't have needed. "It takes an extra discipline," she argued, for the poet to work this way. In addition, "The reader is induced to concentrate a little harder . . . can't skim over the surface." Notice how she frames it in terms of mental effort; quite clearly we're in the realm of knowledge achieved. And notice that she sees the effort required from both writer and reader. *Dear Elizabeth, work with me here.*

This, then, is a classic discussion about technique and the role of convention in writing. Ever the patrician, Elizabeth Bishop is a Platonist; form is not something she would have disturbed. Convention gives us all we need; the writer is accountable to tradition, and the reader is a consumer. So, to Bishop, experimentation is purely annoying—trivial at best and potentially disastrous. May Swenson advocates a more progressive writing theory; she sees the writer and reader in league, both working hard to create and to interpret their joint creation. Her understanding of rhetorical context seems Aristotelian; her textual theory sounds like Rosenblatt and Iser; and, in loosening the hold of syntax on the word, she glances toward the concrete poets. This is the stance of the avant garde—of the technique pioneer, one might say—this willingness to reconfigure the maps of convention. Swenson's defense here brings to mind the story of Marcel Duchamp, whose cubist painting *Nude Descending a Staircase* she invokes in the poem "The DNA Molecule." A cubist nude was an idea that many critics were unable to process. On its first gallery showing, the piece was described as "an explosion in a shingle factory." Duchamp was persuaded to withdraw it, but "all the same," he wrote in his journal, "it moves" (Sirc 34).

It's interesting that this Swenson/Bishop exchange should take place in 1953 and that neither poet should mention the vigorous discussion of visual poetry taking place around the world at that time. Bishop does refer to the annoying French, but dismisses them as if they are alone in their oddity. In fact, 1953 was the year in which Augusto de Campos published

Poetamenos in São Paulo—Brazil, that is, where Bishop lived. De Campos and friends had established the Noigandres group there three years earlier and were exchanging regularly with concrete poets and artists from several countries—including France, of course, but also Switzerland, Austria, and, by the end of the decade, even Japan. According to Mary Ellen Solt, not much concrete was going on in the U.S. (though Ezra Pound and e. e. cummings were icons around the world), but elsewhere, the question of form in poetry and in the other arts was much in dispute. Duchamp and Calder were active. Idealism was ascendant. Manifestoes were being written. What interests me about all this is that in these few pages of the Swenson/Bishop correspondence, we can see Swenson in the 1950s beginning to test some of the same concretist, post-symbolist ideas about form—which she will later develop into a major theme in her work. As an odd but provocative aside, we might notice that with the word *noigandres*, de Campos and company invoke Pound (Canto XX: “noigandres / Now what the deffil can that mean!”), and then remember that Pound first published with James Laughlin at *New Directions*, for whom May Swenson worked as a manuscript reader in the 1950s (Knudson and Bigelow 57).

WRITING AND THINKING

From what we’ve seen so far, it seems May Swenson might have felt at home with the approach to writing theory later called expressivism or expressionism, represented by such major figures as Janet Emig, Linda Flower, Peter Elbow, and Donald Murray. Like these theorists of the 1970s, Swenson took a keen interest in the cognitive process of invention, of expression, and she was more than willing to break with the established order in order to achieve a desired effect. Yet Swenson’s concept of “knowledge received” seems to conflict with her friend Janet Emig’s watershed article, “Writing as a Mode of Thinking.” In this article, Emig argues from experimental research that the very act of writing and the cognitive processes associated with learning are mutually stimulative. Or, as expressivists often put it, one writes in order to find out what one thinks. Swenson’s received knowledge, in contrast, almost implies a passive role for the writer: “to record.” This position makes her vulnerable to the critique of the expressivists that James Berlin articulates throughout his work—for example in *Rhetoric and Reality*.

For Berlin, the major failing of the expressivists (and let’s acknowledge that Berlin invents this label, a grand reductive move in the first place) is

that they are insufficiently contextual or rhetorical, take too little notice of the social and cultural context in which writing necessarily occurs. In what is still a surprisingly unchallenged caricature, Berlin sketches the expressionists as (one infers) rhetorically naive, concerned overly with invention *qua* Romantic “inspiration” and not enough with the gritty Aristotelian *polis* where one must invent *to* and *for* an audience, *from within* a context situated in and limited by cultural imperatives.

But in the 1953 correspondence we see that Swenson wants to balance received with achieved. Unlike Berlin’s stereotype of the expressivists and the Romantic tradition, she is deeply committed to connecting with the Other, on the other side of the page. To Swenson, the reader can be induced to go deep, can’t skim, must concentrate, must co-create; both writer and reader have an active role in creation of the text. As Gudrun Grabher contends in her chapter in this volume, May Swenson hardly opens an eye, an *I*, in her poems, without reflecting in it a *you*. She is deeply interested in her context and audience.

One is tempted, then, to read May Swenson’s writing theory through the work of those who (reappropriating Berlin’s simplistic category) have called themselves “social expressivists.” Sherrie Gradin comes to mind, as do Wendy Bishop, Lad Tobin, and others, though Swenson predates them by decades. This connection highlights Swenson’s deliberate and ongoing negotiation with her reader. If the form of her typography is “a device” calculated to induce the reader to concentrate, then clearly she is rhetorically aware. She asks us to read her wonderful mind indeed, but the very act of inviting the reader to go beyond skimming is already acknowledgment of, and collaboration with, her audience. Her concern in readings and written commentaries to explain, to give us an explicit theoretical *entré* to her process is further evidence of love for audience and her unwillingness to be rhetorically opaque. Poetry for Swenson is an access to the world of the senses, and providing this access “is done with words; with their combination—sometimes with their unstringing” (*Iconographs* 87). I love the word “unstringing.” Language becomes a bracelet of beads, and the poet is allowed to snip the string. “If so, it is in order to make the mind re-member (by dismemberment) the elements, the smallest particles, ventricles, radicals, down to, or into, the Grain—the buried grain of language . . . on which depends the transfer of Sense.”² Thus, if she invents a typographical effect, if she dismembers the word or the page, this

2. Her language here, taken from *Iconographs*, 87, recalls Pierre Garnier and his amazing aim “to pulverize” (*pulveriser*) the word. Garnier would have been the kind of French poet that Elizabeth Bishop found “purely annoying.”

is calculated to make the familiar unfamiliar, so that we may re-member it as an available means of effect or persuasion. “It moves,” she tells us. This may leave a reader nonplussed, but never unwelcomed.

WRITING LIKE LIGHTNING

Of course, May Swenson went far beyond composing without punctuation. In comments on the Caedmon collection following “The Lightning,” she offered a glimpse of her emerging theory of iconographic poetry: “[‘The Lightning’] is a pivotal poem in my book *Half Sun Half Sleep*—a title indicative of the primitive bipolar suspension in which my poems often begin to form. One of my devices is to work a visual metaphor by means of the typography. As seen on the page, there is a streak of white space that runs diagonally through the body of the poem, symbolizing the lightning, and this even splits some of the words.”

Both of Swenson’s realms—the *received* and the *achieved*—are represented in these remarks. We know already that she *receives* many poems “by way of the subconscious” through a trancelike suspension, as she did “In Navajoland” and “Bison Crossing.” Poems, for her, are born—and recall that she means the *words* of the poem arrive that way: the “language and message.” The word is the privileged category; arrangement is something else. Arrangement takes effort, an *extra* (an additional) discipline. Even though she may be creating a “visual metaphor,” this creation is not a birth, but a work, a device. “One of my devices.” One would suppose that for another writer (and certainly for a visual artist) these categories might be reversed, with the visual arrangement appearing first by inspiration before the mind’s eye. But for Swenson, the “message” was *received*, and the shape of words on the page is all about artifice and technique; it’s a knowledge *achieved* by mental effort.

She gives us a little more in *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 have not meant the poems to depend upon, or depend from, their shapes or their frames; these were thought of only after the

whole language structure and behavior was complete in each instance. What the poems say or show, their way of doing it with *language*, is the main thing. . . .

With the physical senses we meet the world and each other—a world of objects, human and otherwise, where words on a page are objects, too. The first instrument to make contact, it seems to me, and the quickest to report it, is the eye. The poems in *Iconographs*, with their profiles, or space patterns, or other graphic emphases, signal that they are to be seen, as well as read and heard, I suppose. (86–87)

Her Brazilian contemporaries and other concrete poets by this point have put aside the form vs. content dilemma as insoluble, but it still interests May Swenson. And why not? It has interested European discourse about art since the Greeks came up with the idea of *mimesis*. Try as we might to read a poem at its surface, we always find ourselves looking to game the system, staring right through a work of art in hope of a meaning beyond. As I draft this page, for example, Christo's and Jeanne-Claude's installation *The Gates* is being unveiled in Central Park, and New Yorkers are asking each other, "What the deffil can it mean?" It's almost impossible, given our tradition of thought, *not* to try to "see through everything." But by 1953, as we noticed, May Swenson already wanted the reader to think of a poem not so much (or not only) as a code with hidden meaning, but to experience it also as an object on a page. Her comment against skimming notwithstanding, it is a fact that to mess about with punctuation inevitably draws attention to the *surface* of convention, if not yet to the senses. Her 1970 remarks in *Iconographs* reflect an additional seventeen years of consideration, and here she describes consciously manipulating the surface, the profile, "the graphic emphasis," and deliberately shaping the poem so as to "make contact" with the senses of the reader. Her idea of dismemberment, noted above, or even of simply seeing the word as an object in space, is much in tune with the "purely annoying" French of her day. (Elizabeth Bishop sniffs here and flicks a crumb from a white saucer.) The French, like Pierre Garnier, whose manifesto called for a new aesthetic of *Spatialisme* in poetry. "Every word is an abstract picture," he wrote. "A surface . . . an element. The word is a material. The word is an object. . . . We must grind our well-worn language to dust" ("Manifeste" np). We must unstring it.

Even here, however, Swenson's rationalism isn't tempted to go as far as *Spatialisme* and let go of the *form/content* binary, but she does move

them into an almost equal partnership. The word “iconograph” itself gives them equal billing,³ as do her alliterative pairings “material/mold” and “sequence/simultaneity.” She even allows that for a reader, there is “an instant object-to-eye encounter,” with comprehension of the words following in its own time. A “symbiotic whole,” she writes, and one begins to think, yes, she does mean this, maybe she does think of the poem as a visual object in space. But then she takes it all back on the next page. “[L]anguage is the main thing.” The visual is a “device,” she says. Frames (paradoxically, since Swenson’s father was an artist in the woodshop), mere visual frames, are not meant to carry the weight of the poems: frames are not what the poems “depend upon or depend from.” Always, in composing the iconographs, visual comes *after* verbal.

I don’t have any remarks from Swenson about the wonderful, multi-genre “Rainbow Hummingbird Lamplight,” but as it was written in 1980, a decade after *Iconographs* was published, I’m ready to speculate that she had by then pushed her explanations yet further. In the opening to that poem, shape and subject are one indeed, and she exemplifies the remark of Susan Sontag that one need not place “matter on the inside, style on the outside. . . . The mask is the face” (18). Or, perversely, as in Garnier’s ideal, all masks have fallen, setting words and poets and readers free—free as a rock, free as a wave. “Suddenly [the poet] finds himself in this world without pope, without king, without religion and without recourse—like the trees and the birds, the dancers and the boats, the waves. And he himself is tree and bird and dancer and boat and wave—free, now that all the masks have fallen” (“Deuxième manifeste” qtd in Solt 33).

(*Ah, the sixties in Paris . . .*)

A THEORY OF EVERYTHING

Listen to what May Swenson says about “How Everything Happens” on the Caedmon recording: “How Everything Happens (Based on a Study of the Wave)’ is a very simple iconograph of only six lines—each line a sentence—and what each line says, it does. That is, it visually acts

3. I’m not sure why Swenson needed the term “iconograph.” “Figured” and “shaped” have been employed for centuries to describe typographically diverse verse. “Concrete” and “visual” were also much in use during Swenson’s era for work similar to what she creates—though often with a different language/image balance (see Mary Ellen Solt’s *Concrete Poetry* for a survey.) She explains how she means “iconograph” in her afterword to *Iconographs*, but why she rejected other terms remains a mystery. Perhaps she felt that more common names for the genre were constricting or imprecise. Perhaps she appreciated how the term “iconograph” itself both forces and maintains the tension between material and mold, received and achieved

out its statement. [The poem] comprises a philosophical formula that can be applied to events in general, including the event of creative writing.” Swenson then reads the poem (see below) and follows up with these remarks: “On the page, the words of each line stack up or pull back, and only in the case of the line ‘nothing is happening’ is the line typed conventionally straight. My iconographic arrangements are a very conscious device employed only after the poem is completed in terms of its language and its message. One analogy could be that of a painter who thinks of a frame that will fit and enhance his work only after his canvas is complete. The text of the poem must be knowledge received, while aspects in the technique of presentation are achieved consciously.”

Text and technique. Received and achieved. Alicia Ostriker implies in her chapter that it is risky for writers to take strong positions on writing, and I have to agree with her. Still, don’t you love May Swenson’s impulse to totalize? My instinct has always been to stress the verb in this poem’s title—“How Everything *Happens*”—but that’s wrong. When Swenson reads the title aloud, her inflection tells you just what she means: this is a poem about how *everything* happens. Then the subtitle: “Based on a Study of the Wave.” *The Wave*. The Platonic wave. And most of all, I love this: it “comprises a philosophical formula that can be generalized to all events.” Like dividing knowledge into achieved and received, these are categorical pronouncements, claims of a sort that criticism left behind with . . . you know, whatever we did before deconstruction. We can’t say these things in our day of ambivalence, aporia, and the indeterminate signifier. Scholars are bureaucrats now; we can’t say these things.

Then she offers the quiet remark we’re quite likely to overlook: even creative writing follows this pattern of the wave. Indulgent smiles all around. It sounds like humor, like self-mockery. We almost miss it here, and in fact we *do* miss it if we’ve only read the poem and haven’t heard Swenson introduce it as on the Caedmon collection. *Even creative writing*, she claims. Even, asks a student in the back, um like, the writing of this poem? This is when we see what she’s done. In a six-line poem, by device and design *achieved*, she unpacks for us the very experience of knowledge *received*.

Six lines. Eliminate the duplicates, and there are only nineteen words in the poem. Nineteen words to exemplify how *everything*—including the composition of a deeply ambitious philosophical poem—happens. And, ironically, much of this poem’s ambition is in how it aims to contradict our intuition that the creative is complex. Knowledge *received* isn’t complex; it’s only deep. Consider the words of the poem in its most reduced form, “only six lines—each line a sentence”:

HOW EVERYTHING HAPPENS

When nothing is happening, something is stacking up to happen.
When it happens, something pulls back not to happen.
When pulling back happens stacking up has happened.
When it has happened something pulls back while nothing stacks up.
Then nothing is happening.
Then something stacks up pushes forward and happens.

A friend of mine is an artist, a designer of medical equipment and medical procedures. He describes his creative process quite simply as a period of waiting between two important moments. The first moment is when he understands a design question (*What must this object or process achieve?*), and second, at the far end of the process, is the moment when the resolution occurs to him. Between the two, he must keep his pencil in motion. What he draws at any given moment, he says, may create momentum and push him toward resolution, or it may only distract, pulling him back or in another direction. Sometimes nothing is happening. Regardless, he knows that this trough of waiting between question and answer is finite, and the resolution will form in his mind when he has given it enough drafts to work with. When the moment is right, everything happens.

Even in the simple sentence form above, Swenson's prosody mimics the rhythm of a wave, as does the conceptual material, with its stacking up and pulling back. In this form, what she calls the language or message is interesting, but not compelling. The "device" is needed. (See next page.)

It takes the sculpting of the lines in space to create the immediate object-to-eye encounter. Still, look at it; at least to my own immediate eye, in the form achieved here in its official *Iconographs* version, the fluidity of wave motion isn't evident enough. The object my eyes encounter (say, if I hold it at arm's length, where without my glasses the graphé blurs into icon) is more of a thunderbolt. A mystifying zigzag, semiotically unrelated to the language and message of the sea. As a reader, I still have work to do—or play to do—before the object in the poet's mind comes as well to my own.

One can't help thinking of the limitations of the 1960s typewriter and of the page in "portrait" mode when the poet's conception is "landscape" (or in this case, *seascape*). Mallarmé had a similar problem: the visual conception of his poem "Un coup de dés" was quite simply too wide for the materials of writing—of printing, rather—available at the time of its composing.

Michael Spooner

How Everything Happens (Based on a Study of the Wave)

happen.
to
up
stacking
is
something
When nothing is happening
When it happens
something
pulls
back
not
to
happen.
When pulling back stacking up has happened.
happens
has happened stacks up.
When it something nothing
pulls back while
Then nothing is happening.
happens.
and
forward
pushes
up
stacks
something
Then

[Sea Cliff, New York, 1967] (*Iconographs* 70)

When it happens
 happen.
 something
 pulls
 back
 not
 to
 happen.
 to
 up
 stacking
 is
 something
 When nothing is happening

Apollinaire and cummings more strategically composed for the size of page they knew lay ahead at the printer's. Swenson did the same most of the time. But with "How Everything Happens," she faced a dilemma. The wave on the sea—in its stacking up and its pulling back, its nothing and its happening—always composes itself in horizontals, and horizontals are not well-represented on the vertically oriented page, even on the large-format page of *Iconographs*. Swenson finds that what she can achieve in shaping and framing within the limits of her technology will not, cannot, bear the weight of the received poem. she finds the page forcing her to saw the sea into stove-lengths stacked vertically. It is only by mentally unstacking the poem, trebling the page width, and imagining the lines laid end to end that I can "see" what the poet saw. Teaching the poem to university students, I had to do this literally before they could truly read it. In fact, I used a computer slide program to roll the lines out from left to right, end to end, with May Swenson's recorded voice reciting them in the background. (You'll have to turn the book sideways.)

And so on. What this did for the students was to show concretely the effort that a reader is induced to make in order to achieve the visual effect that the poet means to create. Here we see as well as hear how the poem is inspired by the primal, meditative, hypnotic rhythms of the sea. The language mimes this rhythm in its simplicity and repetition. And in this visual shape, the poem suggests that knowledge received indeed can arrive in an instant object-to-eye encounter with the material world. And look what lies hidden in "How Everything Happens," which our eye would have encountered immediately if only it had been composed in PowerPoint.

HOW EVERYTHING HAPPENS

<i>Knowledge Achieved</i>	<i>Knowledge Received</i>
effort	instinct
reason	revelation
device	trance
style	content
mold	material
sensation	sense
Modernism	Romanticism
conscious mind	subconscious mind
shape/arrangement	language/meaning
“an extra discipline”	“without apparent strain”
materiality of print	inspiration of language
frame	painting
icono	graph
square	circle

Throughout the Caedmon collection and its related texts, we see this lovely symmetry, every term balanced by another, a pillar of white space holding two knowledges in tension. Even in *Iconographs*, Swenson flirts with parity: “no grain of sense [the word], without sensation [the image]” (87). Still, the poet insists that, for her, language comes first because the poem is made of words—and words, for a mind as verbally accomplished as May Swenson’s, take less “mental effort.” They’re born, they descend, they’re *received* in a trancelike state, the mind rinsed and ready to be filled. For her, it’s the image that takes work to achieve.

Yet one returns to “Rainbow Hummingbird Lamplight.”



[Dorland MT, 1980]

Only a few years past Caedmon, the image lands lightly as thought, as though it, too, descended fully formed from some higher mind. Words on this page are gently dismembered and defamiliarized, arranged and re-arranged, until they are truly objects—objects to be experienced, with no concern about seeing through to an interpretation and no anxiety about the difference between frames and language. This time, the poet transcends her own categories, and “Rainbow” cannot be understood in terms reducible to achieved and received. Both do appear, but what the eye immediately apprehends is an ideal equilibration of the two—neither achieved nor received, but an object to be *perceived*. And May Swenson has again created a *trompe l’oeil* for us of two simple parts, telescoping away to a third realm, where the two balance and integrate, where knowledge is one, and the poem leaves us looking into the bottom of a rinsed white cup.

