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Body My House

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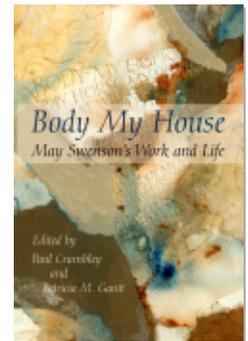
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THE QUEER POETICS OF MAY SWENSON

Suzanne Juhasz

The lens of academic queer theory seems to me to be an especially useful perspective for viewing the poetry of May Swenson—especially her unconventional representations of gender, sexuality, and desire. The meanings of “queer” as it is used in contemporary academic theory include to skew, to destabilize, and to open gaps, resonances, and possibilities. In such ways Swenson’s poetic language constructs identities that shift, change, and interact. In this process they attain forms that query and subvert conventional definitions. I wish to call Swenson’s poetics and practices queer, because I wish to find a use for the queer lens to observe something other than biography or subject matter *per se*. The fact that Swenson was a lesbian, or that she wrote some (although not many) poems overtly about lesbian experience, is not my focus here. If we see queer operating as a principle in literary language, we can extend and enrich our concept of queer art beyond pointing to the literal facts of a poet’s life or subject matter.

What exactly is queer? *Queer* is a verb, an adjective, and a noun. The verb means to skew or thwart. The adjective means unconventional, strange, suspicious. Queer as a noun was originally a derogatory term used for male homosexuals. It has been reclaimed as a tool to question and disarrange normative systems of behavior and identity in our culture, especially as they regulate gender, sexuality, and desire. Here are some definitions from well-known queer theorists. Donald Hall says that to queer presses upon systems of classifications to torture their lines of demarcation (14). According to Eve Sedgwick queer refers to “the open mesh of

possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality are made (or *can't be made*) to signify monolithically" (8). Diana Fuss writes that queer imaginatively enacts "sexual redefinitions, reborderizations, and rearticulations" (7).

In many of her poems May Swenson queers conventional gender definitions and in the process views desire as a force that erupts and is sustained by the interchange rather than the distinctiveness of gender polarities. Focusing on the active/passive dialectic so commonly tied to traditional definitions of masculine and feminine, Swenson shows not only that one need not be a man to be active, a woman to be passive, but that these qualities in tandem, as they fluctuate between persons, can spark fluidity, agitations, shape-shifting, and transfers. In this space desire can play. This queer desire is not the thrill of dominating or submitting: "I want to take you!" or "Take me!" Rather, it is inspired by both sameness and difference, by the contingency or complementarity of the selves who engage in it. Queer desire presents an alternative to traditional heterosexuality, whether it is specifically homosexual or not.

To explore queer desire this paper moves from Swenson's "nature poems" to her "love poems" (these categories blur on many occasions) to show how her basic interest in the process of identity formation, which she generally understands by way of the body and the senses, is heightened when she confronts the pressures of conformity that are systematically engaged when gender and sexuality come into the picture. Swenson, an inveterate observer of nature, could not help but notice and represent the changes in natural forms effected by the process of time, or what is called mutability. This organizing, even spiritual, principle has long been a staple in English poetry, and it is certainly observable in some of Swenson's poems that take a keen look at natural phenomena. However, her interest in "unconceived fluidities and agitations" (a phrase from her poem, "A Subject of the Waves") is a little different, for the shapes that shift in many of her poems are under pressure from forces other than time. These are the forces of culture. But Swenson tries to evade, even subvert them. "If I am observing something," says Swenson in an interview, "I don't think about its name or label to begin with. I think of how it is affecting me" (McFall 105). Significantly, she seeks to allow her personal sensory response to observed forms to direct how she identifies them and their relationships with one another.

"For me," says Swenson in another interview, "nature includes everything: the entire universe, the city, the country, the human mind, human

creatures, and the animal creatures” (McFall 121). In her poems humans and natural phenomena interface and interchange, and these crossings seem to have less to do with humanistic principles such as mutability or even metamorphosis (a developmental function of time) than with the idiosyncratic responses that this poet experiences. And when gender and sexuality are the subject of her focus, as in, in particular, her love poems, her non-normative view and experience make these poems slyly contentious and suggestively radical, as they offer some unconventional alternatives. The transfers and transformations that occur repeatedly throughout the poems between natural phenomena and humans occur as well between people: in particular, between (or across) genders. “The world,” she says, “is made up of male, female, and combinations thereof” (McFall 123). These “combinations thereof” are of special interest to her as she evokes the ways in which love and desire influence the formation of identity.

Looking at poetry through a queer lens brings me, not surprisingly, to language. Language serves as a site for queering, and the prevailing linguistic form by which such combinations and transfers occur in May Swenson’s poetry is metaphor. Metaphor, which means in Greek *to carry across* or *transfer*, is a traditional trope for linguistic shape-shifting. As such, it has been used by poets throughout time for many purposes. Yet metaphor, it turns out, has a lot in common with queer, because, as Sedgwick notes, “The word ‘queer’ itself means *across*—it comes from the Indo-European root—*twerkw*, which also yields the German *queer* (traverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist)” (xii). We can see metaphor as a way to queer language, especially because in its process one thing does not become another as much as a third thing is created, something composed of the *relationship* between the original two—a relationship based in both commonality and difference. Not $A=B$ but $A+B=C$. For example, the phrase, “Our limbs like eels / are water boned” from Swenson’s poem, “Swimmers,” contains one simile (“like eels”) and one metaphor, “limbs are . . . water-boned.” There is no such thing as bones made of water—until metaphor makes it so. Loose limbed would be close, but the point of the phrase is also to connect the two lovers with water creatures, eels, and then with water itself: water-boned. I will return to this metaphor later.

Swenson says that “nature includes everything.” Metaphor is her choice for yoking experiential components to create an everything. There are no tenors and vehicles here. The real work of metaphor is to create relationships—ones we may not have noticed before—in which A and B are companionate, not hierarchical. For example, when reading her poem called “Subconscious Sea,” to ask whether the sea is a metaphor for the

mind or the mind is a metaphor for the sea is the wrong question (*Nature: Poems Old and New* 69–70). The poem is about how and in what ways they partake of one another. The sea is an image for the subconscious part of the mind, even as the observer of nature (a role in which Swenson consistently casts herself) is asking to be excited and enlightened by thinking about the sea:

Oh to cast the mind
into that cool green trough
to be washed and dashed
and twirled and dipped
between those waves

The “cool green trough” could be a metaphor for nature’s sea, reminding us not only of its depth but that it is a place from which one can take emotional or philosophical sustenance. All that washing and dashing and twirling and dipping could be read as invigoration. Or the trough could be read as the depths of the subconscious, into which consciousness plunges for that same sort of insight. What is revealed is an overlap or metaphoric relationship between the mind and the sea. The sea is related to the subconscious because *both* can provide this service. In this fashion they are linked.

The lines that follow underline this association, as the sea is personified (since the sea and the mind are aspects of one another) by way of metaphor: “Delicious the swipe of a green wave / Across this puzzled forehead.” The remainder of the poem expands upon its initial conceit. Through a long night the speaker longs to drop “this enigmatic clot” (the tangle of her *thoughts*, I imagine) down the “nebulous stairs” of the sea, so as to rest at last on the ocean’s floor. Then comes the final stanza:

There beneath layers
of a thousand waves
a thousand veils between it
and the sun
this frail bowl
nuzzled in sand
salt grains sifting its sockets
would come to rest
taste its own eternity

The conscious mind is represented metaphorically as both an enigmatic clot and a frail bowl. As it sinks into the unconscious, or the bottom of

the sea, it sinks as well into the archaic past or future: “its own eternity.” Trouble is, the final image is awfully like a shipwreck or a drowned corpse that is gradually turning into the sea, as salt grains sift its sockets. Therefore the sea as the source for stimulation or enlightenment turns into a site for the loss of the conscious mind (or sun) that is human life. Thus this final descent is a death—it’s either literal or figurative drowning. For a poet like Swenson, who admires both the subconscious and the beneficial effects of sea-gazing, this cautionary tale may well point to the dangers of relinquishing the powers of the intellect, or the seashore, too completely.

Linguistically, this poem employs figures of speech, notably metaphors, both locally and globally, to construct a metonymic connection between mind and sea. The process destabilizes traditional borders of taxonomy and opens up possibilities for identities that are fluid. This gesture is not quite what we would call “queer,” because queer is usually involved with gender and sexuality, but as a habitual mode of thinking and writing for Swenson, it makes possible her unconventional explorations of desire, sexuality, and gender.

Swenson’s poem “Swimmers” also appears in her collection *Nature: Poems Old and New*, I expect because there is so much ocean in it (218). However, the central metaphor or conceit is ocean/desire (A/B). It is a poem about sex, aquatic and human, as making love is shown to be a maritime activity. The conceit of the poem is that sexual intercourse equals being “Tossed/by the muscular sea” (the poem’s opening lines). Indeed, the central metaphoric phrase in the poem is “the surf of desire.”

This sea is muscular, it is “rough love.” Desire is “surf,” because it is rough water. “Total delight” is a “terror.” The poem details the lovers’ coming together, climaxing, and finally resting on the shore (of sleep), by way of their watery experience. For example, they are “sucked to the root / of the water-mountain— / immense—” Thus we learn something about both the nature of their sexual activities and its oceanic dimensions.

In their passion the lovers become watery:

Our limbs like eels
are water-boned,
our faces lost
to difference and

contour, as the lapping
crests.

The fluidity achieved by way of water-boned makes possible the crucial phrase, "Our faces lost / to difference and // contour, as the lapping crests." As the lapping of the waves (or tongues) crests (reaches climax), the lovers are lost to difference: they lose their distinctive boundaries in their partnership with one another and with the sea.

The sea is clearly more than an analogy for the lovers' activities. It participates in and partakes of desire—a desire which is, therefore, not limited to the human sphere. Indeed, the physical structure of the poem on the page—four stanzas to the left, four to the right, with the final stanza, in which the lovers reach the shores of sleep, balanced between the two columns (for this is the shore and no longer the sea) testifies to the metaphoric relation between humans and nature by way of desire.

Throughout, the poem insists that the active nature of the ocean is what controls the actions of the lovers: they are sucked, towed, made to race, and rocked—until "supine," they glide to the shores of sleep. In this way the lovers' acts may be seen to have a passive component, for they are in service of and served by desire, oceanic in its natural/monumental power. Thus, although the lovers are not gendered here, the poem does tweak gender in its discussion of desire. Desire is "masculine" (active), the lovers are "feminine" (passive), but of course, it *their* desire. They can be both lost to difference and they can generate or take part in an experience of difference (i.e., active/passive) and profit from it.

In these ways metaphoric language produces shape-shifting: it traverses, twists, or queers our understanding of experience, as the urgent and all-powerful force of desire is linguistically manifested as both sex and sea. We understand desire in a new way that does in fact "reborderize" (Diana Fuss's word) its meaning. First, because as a human experience it is seen in terms of its foundations in the natural world. Second, more interestingly yet, because it functions as a transfer between two lovers that plays along the active/passive scale without assigning these traditional signifiers of gender to either partner alone. I would say that this love poem is queer without being particularly homosexual.

On the other hand, the association of queer as verb, adjective, or noun with sexuality and gender is frequently used to articulate and find a space for "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (Halperin 62)—that is, something other than normative heterosexuality. Certainly, queer has been used "sometimes abusively, and other times endearingly, as a colloquial term for homosexuality" (Sullivan v). When we turn to Swenson's love poetry, we see that it is the interplay and interchange between genders, its "unconceived fluidities and agitations,"

that interest her, because this is what sparks and enhances erotic desire. I think that queer occurs when genders are not normative. Queer that is homosexual (in this case, lesbian) occurs when genders are not normative and sexed bodies are same.

Swenson's love poems are sometimes lesbian narratives, sometimes not; but throughout they are tales of queer desire. They are characterized by an eroticism that is often playful and always central: the sensuality that is everpresent in her nature poems becomes more urgent when it articulates human love. By and large, critical commentary on Swenson has neglected these poems, which were collected in 1991 in a volume entitled *The Complete Love Poems of May Swenson*.¹ When critics have looked at Swenson and sexuality, they have generally focused on whether or not the love poems are explicitly about lesbians—with most people, like Maxine Kumin in her foreword to the volume, asserting Swenson's reticence about these matters and gratefully seeing the poems as more about the "human condition." "Setting these *role-playing* poems aside," writes Kumin, "the majority of Swenson's love poems are human you-and-I poems, or we poems, exquisitely tender and understated" (ix, my emphasis). I don't think that she and I are reading the same volume, for aside from the fact that just about all of the love poems are about this "role-playing," there are quite a few that are bold, sexy, and lesbian.

Sue Russell, on the other hand, in "A Mysterious and Lavish Power: How Things Continue to Take Place in the Work of May Swenson," celebrates the lesbian content of the poems, in the places where she can find it. Furthermore, Mark Doty, in a recent paper about Swenson and her poetic relationship to lesbianism, sees the "thrilling dance of reticence and self-disclosure" in her poems not as a ploy or an evasion but as a dialogic, a driving force in her work, an aesthetic (89, 92). In her complex positioning of her sexual identity, he observes, Swenson writes as if she is protecting a secret that is not really a secret, and that very stance, I think, occasions the queer sweet thrills of the reader.

Kirstin Zona's work, informed by queer theory, recognizes how gender is always at issue in these poems, no matter the pronouns. Referencing Judith Butler, she observes how Swenson's sexual imagery can be subversive in its "appropriation, or reconfiguration, of normative tropes." But she seems disappointed that the poets' imagery appears to reiterate familiar heterosexual codes, so that in the end, "there does not exist a truer, more 'lesbian' space in which they can escape the troubled dynamics of their

1. Hereafter, *L*.

relationship” (*Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop & May Swenson* 131–32, 137). She concludes that Swenson’s manipulation of sexual imagery implies that there is no such thing as an identity that is not ideologically saturated, and that any attempt to explicate or dislodge the mainstays of the dominant cultural codes will always be entangled in the very terms they work to subvert” (137). This is true. However, such an observation need not be an end but could rather be viewed as a beginning.

Judith Butler has pointed out as well that all identities are constructed through performativity, not as expressions of some essential being. Moreover, she says, these performances must endlessly be repeated, and, therefore, there will of necessity be gaps between these repetitions. It is precisely in these gaps that something new can be created. In essays such as “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” and “Critically Queer,” Butler points to the possibility for a breaking or subversive repetition of gender style, sites for potential gender transformation. In other words, it is very true that lesbians neither live nor write in a pure space outside of culture. Therefore, lesbian gender and lesbian sexuality must play with and upon cultural definitions. This is exactly where queer comes in. The reconfiguration of normative tropes is what lesbians *do* to queer the space in which they live. There is parody, there is playfulness, as Zona, along with Sue Ellen Case in her well-known essay, “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” observe. There is also, potentially, transformation.

For example, when Zona looks at several of Swenson’s love poems, she notes something that may well be “new”: that some poems construct subjectivity as transitive, and that Swenson invokes identity at the “liminal site *between bodies*, between self and other . . . that marks her portrait of selfhood as contingent” in versions of identification (*Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop & May Swenson* 125). Such contingent or transitive subjectivity is not conventional; indeed, it may well have something to do with what I have termed “complementary identification”—a process where the play of difference and sameness in versions of identification becomes the hallmark of a lesbian sexuality and identity that is different from normative heterosexuality: one that can occur, I maintain, in those gaps of which Butler speaks (*Juhasz, A Desire for Women* 154).

In other words, when May Swenson moves her focus onto human lovers and their desire, the fluidity and shape-shifting that we have observed in other of her poems becomes yet more pronounced, as the lovers struggle as much as play with conventional gender and sexuality. We should not be surprised that metaphor again serves as the linguistic agent for these transfers.

“Facing” (L 21) is a poem about the relationship between desire, difference, and transitive subjectivity (Zona, *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop & May Swenson*) or complementary identification. It is a particularly helpful place to begin my exploration of the love poems, if only because it employs the visual patterns in which Swenson delighted, a form that “acts out” the theme of the poem. In this case, two lovers “face” one another on the page—lover number one speaks, lover number two responds, as two narratives line up beside one another. These lovers’ interacting lyrics create complementary identification—an interchange of desire that is based in the play of difference and sameness—or, as Zona says, subjectivities that are transitive (metaphor’s carrying across) (144). To accomplish this, traditional heterosexual gender and sexuality must be evoked, queer-ied, and played upon, so as to create an alternative space of desire. This space is probably lesbian, and it is decidedly queer. It is created in language.

These two lovers are *not* specifically gendered, but the poem speaks pointedly to gender’s charge to dichotomize characteristics and qualities: sun/moon, day/night, light/dark, and, not surprisingly, active/passive. Lover number one, who speaks first, claims the passive side of the hyphen as she is discovered, charged, and brought into being by the other’s light, eye, and power. At the same time, her poem begins with, “You I love,” and ends with “do I move”—evocations of activity that rhyme and enforce one another with every word: “you,” “do”; “I” “I”; love,” “move.” This interaction between passive and active underlies her love poem.

Lover number one identifies herself as the beloved, the one loved; but of course in the traditional love lyric, the one loved, the woman, does *not* speak at all. This in itself is a beginning of the subtle challenge to gender roles that the poem enacts. This beloved’s litany of praise calls the other the *light* by which she is discovered, the *eye* that births her from anonymous night, the *face* that causes her to make her circle, the *body* that makes her glow, the *heat* that fires her so that her veins race. In this romantic blazon the speaker praises her lover’s body parts and thereby demonstrates her responsive love. However, such praising is itself an action. More important, in the process of being acted upon, she becomes agential. She makes a circle, her veins race, and she moves in her path of being. Indeed, it is clear from the balancing of the opening “You I love” and the concluding “do I move” that loving, itself, is an act of moving.

I am not arguing that the speaker is *really* active and that the passivity is a pretense, or an affectation, because she is clearly influenced by her lover’s love. What I suggest is that in this poem passivity is not truly inactive, and that activity is influenced by passivity: a gesture—entirely implicated

in love and desire—that both undermines the traditional dichotomy so deeply entrenched in gender definition and creates a relationship between the two lovers that is different from the traditional heterosexual pattern.

Across the page, lover number two—she of light, eye, and power—reveals herself as both a seer and someone seen. She is a constant mirror: always there to be looked into and to reflect—a faithful lover. Her goal is that her lover, who adores *her*, will adore herself, so that adoration will flow both ways, even as desire clearly does. She begins, “As you are sun to me / O I am moon to you.” Traditionally, the moon is female, the sun is masculine, so the speaker is obliquely acknowledging her femaleness, even as, by finding light and sight in her lover, she sees the same power in the moon that the sun possesses. The speaker agrees with the dynamic that her beloved has established: I “give you substance / by my sight / and motion and radiance.” But she adds a few twists. “By my pull / are you waked / to know that you are beautiful.” She is praising the other as much as the other praised her.

She sees her lover’s beauty, luster, and passion. Her own desire releases these qualities and is fired by them. Her litany of love concludes:

So with love’s light
I sculpture you
and in my constant mirror keep
your portrait
that you may adore
yourself as I do.

The overt references to art—this speaker makes her lover’s portrait, and where else but in verse?—cannot help but remind us of the traditional ending of many sonnets, such as Shakespeare’s, where it is always he, the poet, who will ensure her immortality (and bright shining) by way of his black ink. In Swenson’s poem each speaker gives the other the power to construct love’s immortality, and they do so by creating and being created: tossing the roles of active and passive back and forth to construct identities that are complementary.

Other love poems repeat this pattern both more emphatically and with subtle changes that underline the nature of desire. For example, the poem “You Are” (L 41–44) revives the action and images of seeing and seen—“you are my mirror / in your eye’s well I float / my reality proven”—to maintain that “no one / can be sure / by himself / of his own being.” The poem ends:

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my eye is a mirror
in which you float
a well where you dwell smiling . . .

I enfold you
and secrete the liquid
of your being
in that I love you
and you live *in* me

Here the interchange of roles is more obvious. First one is the mirror, then the other; but the point is the same: relationality is necessary for identity, and each lover both takes and gives to create it: “each according to the other,” as she says earlier. Further, the phrase, “secrete the liquid / of your being,” which transpires as one lover enfolds the other, invokes the transfer of both fluids and spirit. It is a metaphor for desire, in all of its many meanings.

The feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, who is a postmodern theorist but not a queer theorist, has introduced an idea about identity formation which is particularly relevant to my concept of complementary identification and to Swenson’s poems. In *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin says that “recognition” is the source for coming into identity: this occurs when one person—in the beginning, the mother—(hopefully) sees/understands the self of the other. She writes, “A person comes to feel that ‘I am the doer who does, I am the author of my acts,’ by being with another person who recognizes her acts, her feelings, her intentions, her existence, her independence. Recognition is the essential response, the constant companion of assertion . . . it includes not only the other’s confirming response, but how we find ourselves in that response” (21). “Facing” is surely a poem that enacts this kind of recognition. For Benjamin mutual recognition is the necessity of recognizing as well as being recognized by the other. We actually have a need, she writes, “to recognize the other as a person who is like us but distinct” (23). No simple enterprise, mutual recognition “is as significant a developmental goal as separation” (24).

Swenson’s mirroring lovers offer recognition to one another, and for her *like but distinct* is always at issue. In “The Kiss” (L 86) she writes:

To match as mittens do
identical and different

Master and mistress each
then I will *be* you and *bee* you

In membranes locked
a peach and peach
would sip each other

How could this not be a lesbian poem? A peach and a peach want to sip one another. Same-and-different is the key to recognition and to lesbian desire. Sameness is exciting—two peaches, but the difference always there between any two people is also there when two people have similar bodies. Lesbian butch and femme play on this difference, using gender stereotypes to create another way to perform masculinity or femininity that we can call queer, as Case has observed. “Master and mistress *each*” (my emphasis). To “*be*” you and to “*bee*” you is the crux of the matter: the first *be* implies sameness, but the second points to the activity of one (a *bee*) sucking upon the receptive other: two, not one. Two who identify with one another in a complementary (give and take) manner and, in the process, help to bring one another’s self or identity into being. A transitive act, as Zona would say.

Once we are alerted to the ways in which lesbian desire, sexuality, and identity are poetically represented through this play between like and difference, “masculine” and “feminine” —where I emphatically put these words and concepts in quotation marks—we can see its markers everywhere in Swenson’s love poems. Human you-and-I poems, indeed! What is queer about lesbian gender and sexuality are the ways in which they use slippage, destabilization, gaps, resonances, and possibilities to construct identities that, as I have said earlier, shift, change, and interact; in these ways they attain forms that query and subvert conventional definitions to reveal something that often exists outside of culture’s representational frames.

In one of Swenson’s most famous love poems, “A Trellis for R” the sexual act itself is poetically created by making on the page a trellis, or arbor, of blue flowers and roses.

B
L
U
E but you are R
o
s
e too
(L 76)

This is how the trellis begins.

R
o
s
e you are B
l
u
e.

This is the end of the trellis. In this poem blue/rose is the dichotomy which is constantly traversed, for if the shape of the poem imitates the look of a nicely constructed trellis, it also is in constant motion on the page, to and fro, even as the lovers are also in constant motion. The speaker/lover is doing a lot of the kissing, sinking, sucking, tonguing, and “milknipping,” while the beloved’s hair glints and shoots, her eyelids close and uncloze, and her nipples stiffen. By the end, the beloved’s body is indeed a thing of fluid movement:

your hair’s wild straw splash
silk spools for your ears.
But where white spouts out spills

on your brow to clear
eyepools wheel shafts of light

These pools and spouts recall earlier moments in the poem in which intimate body parts are adoringly described and made love to. Always, blue shifts to rose, rose shifts to blue. The beloved’s eyes have glazed iris roses, her lids uncloze to blue; her breasts are blue-skinned blown roses. Such a poem recalls others that I have discussed earlier, where humans and the natural world find their definition through ceaseless metaphoric transfer and interaction. Blue/rose relationality is emblematic of the process of identity formation that is Swenson’s signature. Indeed, its use of colors makes a very specific point: on the color wheel, blue and red are distinctive yet indubitably related to one another in a manner that is not static.

What do we know, what do we get, when we see May Swenson as a practitioner of queer poetics? To begin, we see a way to understand how her poetic language, so lush with its metaphoric transfers, gives us a world in which “unconceived fluidities and agitations” create experience. We see gaps, resonances, possibilities that forever push against and past conventional naming and defining. We see how the identity of one thing

or another comes into being through its connections and jostlings and relations with some other thing. Indeed, we see how this space between them, continually formed and reformed, makes boundaries liminal and potential.

In the matter of genders and sexualities, Swenson's queer poetics invite us to see how the patterns of a conventional, normative culture *can* be challenged by way of the play between what is expected and what is possible. Swenson's lovers are often represented as women, but always they occupy gendered positions that are transgressive. Altering the traditional boundaries between genders—in particular, along the active/passive scale—enables her to consider desire itself as sparked by and encouraging of the samenesses and differences that these unconventional genders emanate. Swenson's poetics—her practice and philosophy of language in poems—makes possible the representation of desire that is intense, playful, exuberant, lavish, and definitely queer.