

ITHE USE OF SCIENCE IN MAY SWENSON'S SELECTED POEMS

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Abstract :

May Swenson, a poet who has written poems about many scientific phenomena some of her work focuses on scientific research, for example the exploration of space. This research discussed with selected poems of May Swenson in which she used science as a theme and a new way of structure.

مي سوينسن شاعرة اميركية كتبت قصائد عن عدد من الظواهر العلمية وبعض من اعمالها تركز على البحث العلمي , على سبيل المثال استكشاف الفضاء . هذا البحث يناقش قصائد مختارة لمي سوينسن التي استخدمت بها العلم كموضوع وطريقة جديدة لبناء القصيدة .

The relation of the poet to science has never been a simple one, and the influence of science on poets has often been paramount .Poets , being more sensitive ,more responsive to changes in the climate of opinion than other men, especially when such changes affect their view of man, his place in the universe , the meaning of existence, have always reflected in their poetry the influence of science and technology on their way of thinking about these eternal question.

Anna Thilda May "May" Swenson (1913

-1989) was an American poet and playwright. She is considered one of the most important and original poets of the twentieth century .She has her special way of writing poetry through which she successfully managed to reflect the important changes and exploration of the

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English

space in the "space age"<sup>1</sup>, it is the age in which man invades space. This phenomenon. She considered science as an important way to Fascinated by the new mission of man in the space understand the universe around us, she says, "If there is any hope for understanding the world or understanding the universe, I think that the closest thing we have to it is the discoveries May Swenson had her special view of writing about of science"<sup>2</sup>. Swenson's interest in science clearly appeared in the theme and structure of most of her poems.

For space imagery to carry the convincing  
Power of spontaneous expression arising  
Unconsciously from the deepest self, the  
Poet must be able to acknowledge that space  
Is a place where human beings have lived  
And going to live, and he or she must be able  
To imagine living there in full intensity  
Of sensory perception, emotional response,  
and cognition and language...<sup>3</sup>

MY POEMS

My poems are prayers to a god  
to come into being.  
some mornings I have seen his hair  
flash on the horizon,  
some nights I have seen his heel there  
clear as the moon.

My poems pray him to be  
manifest like lightning\_  
in one pure instant ,abolish  
and recreate the world.

(April 1962)

This poem clearly illustrate Swenson's scientific interests, especially in space and space shuttles, landing on the moon ,traveling through space ,and transcending the gravitational field. Swenson tries to find answers for her questions about the universe and to understand the mystery of our existence in this world.

Who or what are we?Why are we?And what are  
We becoming?What is the relationship between  
man and the universe ?Those are questions  
that ached in the mind of the first poet.

They can be said to have created the  
first poet,and to be the first source  
of the art of poetry.Does the fact  
of our consciousness,unique and seemingly  
miraculous among all of nature's creatures,  
a priori indicate a super-consciousness  
shaping and manipulating the cosmos?<sup>4</sup>



The creatures of this star  
Are made of metal and glass

( line 3-4 p.3 )

Line 3 refers to the earth as a "star." A space traveller would, if it knew anything, know the difference between a star and a planet. In having the visitor describe it this way, the author accomplishes several things. The visitor's naivete is established, making the confusion it is to feel in the coming stanzas more plausible. Also, the word "star" reminds most readers of wonder, of mystery. The emotional associations a reader has with a word constitute the word's "connotation." Richard Howard emphasized in a Tri-Quarterly review that Swenson's enterprise is "to get out herself and into those larger, warmer energies of earth, and to do so by liturgical means"<sup>6</sup>.

In Line 4, the theme of technology is introduced. It is not clear at this point in the poem what the visitor is seeing, or if it is actually Earth that is being visited. From the description given here, the reader can only tell that the visitor mistakenly uses the word "creature," which indicates a life form, to talk about something that has been manufactured.

Through the transparent parts

you can see their guts ( line 5-6 p.3)

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English

"Guts" is a surprisingly informal word for the visitor to use in describing the "creature's" internal organs, but Swenson's purpose becomes clear in the last line of the poem, where the common association of "guts" with "courage" is brought into play. In Line 6, the visitor states the obvious: anything seen within could be considered guts. May Swenson confirmed her interest in science and the space program in the "Craft Interview": "Science comes into my poetry quite a lot. The space program, the astronauts' experiences fascinated me"<sup>7</sup>.

In "Landing on the Moon" Swenson tries to describe the atmosphere upon the moon as an direct reflection of man's first steep on the moon . " When Neil Armstrong touched the lunar regolith ,he said , "That's one small step for a man ,one giant leap for mankind "<sup>8</sup>. Using her imagination she reflected man's dream in landing on the moon.

On the moon there shines earth light  
as moonlight shines upon th earth...  
If on its obsidian we set our weightless foot,  
and sniff no wind, and lick no rain  
and feel no gauze between us and the Fire  
will we trot its grassless skull, sick for the homelike  
shade?

Naked to the earth-beam we shall be,  
who have arrived to map an apparition,  
who walk upon the forehead of a myth.  
Can flesh rub with symbol? If our ball  
be iron, and not light, our earliest wish  
eclipses. Dare we land upon a dream? (line 19-30)

Here ,Swenson mirrors the close connection between the earth and the moon. Thus,the light represented as the imaginary link between the two ,the messenger of

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English

peace. Actually, "space travel has been the privilege of the few but the dream of many"<sup>9</sup>. She expresses man's dream to be on the moon. May Swenson ends her poem with question, Dare we land on a dream? Here, she clarifies that man's dream will be real, nothing impossible any one can achieve his or her dream including Swenson's dream. In her essay "the experience of poetry in a scientific age" Swenson clarifies saying that "my moon is not in the sky, but within my psyche"<sup>10</sup>. She clearly shows a talent in using the space imagery to reflect the internal psyche.

May Swenson once said that her experience of poetry is "based in a craving to get through the curtains of things as they appear, to things as they are, and then into the larger, wilder space of things as they"<sup>11</sup>.

May Swenson "Orbiter 5 Shows How Earth Looks from the Moon" perceives the Indian Ocean as a woman in 3/4 profile, sitting on her heels with her bare feet tucked beneath the tip of Africa. The woman has a holy jug in her right hand;

Asia is

Light swirling up out of her vessel...

Her tail of long hair is

The Arabian Peninsula.

A woman in the earth.

A man in the moon.

(Orbiter 5 Shows How Earth Looks from the Moon )

Here, Swenson gives a gripping image to reflect the connection between the earth and the moon. Man

achieved his dream to flight around the space and landing on the moon became reality so the dream of yesterday becomes the reality of today .

Swenson's poetry has been praised for its imagery ,which is alternately precise and beguiling, and for the quality of her personal and imaginative observations.<sup>12</sup>

" The cross Spider" is another poem in which Swenson Celebrate the space program of NASA . Arabella, the cross spider who was sent into space by NASA to study the effects of weightlessness.

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 <sup>13</sup>

Swenson used the cross spider ,Arabella, as an image for human's quest for the new and unknown Future .It is Swenson "calls for humans to try to achieve a change in perspective that will allow a different vision".

Fifth Scientific Conference of the Faculty of Education, Human Sciences Research  
English

Following the scientific way in writing May Swenson wrote a poem to study the movement of the wave. Actually,

May Swenson is the poet of the perceptible. No writer employs with greater care the organs of sense to apprehend and record the surfaces of the world. She is the exemplar of that first cannon of a poet.<sup>14</sup>

Swenson has structured her observations of wave action in poetic form in her poem "How Everything Happens". Swenson gave this poem a special type based on a scientific study of the wave. Thus, the reader of this poem can feel the movement of the wave, the movement has its effect on the paper. Swenson says:

To cause an instant object-to-eye encounter  
with each poem even before it read word-  
after-word .To have simultaneity as well  
as sequence. To make an existence in space,  
as well as time, for the poem. These have  
been ,I suppose, the impulses behind  
the typed shapes and frames...<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the poem should be printed in its original shape as Swenson put it first without this shape the poem will lose its goal from the scientific perspective.

(How Everything Happens)

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

(Iconographs  
1970)

Actually,  
May Swenson was  
a good observer

for things around her and, she tried to look and examined things around her and wrote poems about all these things. Kevin Bezner wrote in his review to May Swenson collection: Nature :Poems Old and New "We are offered the precise thoughts of a poet who not only observed the non-human world around her, but inhabited it."<sup>16</sup> She tried to understand the universe around her and made her poem a record for her observation with a scientific eye in which she discussed poetry as an art and compares poetry to science. " The universe's basic beauty and balance is the stuff and the soul of her poems"<sup>17</sup>. Swenson finds that what:

she can achieve in shaping and farming 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.<sup>18</sup>

This obviously shown in her poem "The Universe" in which Swenson wrote this poem in such shape, made a space between the lines to emphasized the mess in the modern age "the scientific age"

(The Universe)

What

is it about,

the universe,

the universe about us stretching out?

We, within our brains,

within it,

think

we must unspin

the laws that spin it.

We think *why*

because we think

*because.*

Because we think,

we think  
the universe about us.

But does it think,

the universe?

Then what about?

About us?

If not,

must there be cause

in the universe?

Must it have laws?

And what

if the universe

is not about us?

Then what?

What

is it about?

And what

about us?

(To Mix With Time)

By asking many questions about the universe Swenson tries to have a full understanding for the universe around us and to understand the relationship between man and the world around him .Swenson says that "The

artist and the scientist are our two hopes"<sup>19</sup> Thus, Swenson uses science as a tool for examining the world around her. She made her poem as a reminder for man to think deeply and scientifically in the world around him. Man should be a good observer for his surrounding

What May put in the place of any super-natural view was a truly knowledgeable awareness, rare among poets of our time, of the world as perceived and probed by contemporary science.<sup>20</sup>

To conclude with Swenson uses science as a new instrument of search. It is a high call for changes ,to get out of the human limits ,and to gain full understanding of the unknown beyond man's consciousness .The theme of space exploration could be Swenson indirect call for freedom and following the scientific structure in writing her some of her poems Swenson maintained to break all the limits and to reach the unknown.

#### NOTE

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1.Helene Knox,Space Poems:Close Encounters between the Lyric Imagination and 25 Years of NASA Space Exploration(Lunar and Planetary,1985)p.771

2.Susan Elizabeth Howe, May Swenson's Spiritual Quest( Brigham Young University,2006)P.3

3.Knox,p.775.

4.Howe,p.5

5.Knox,p.773

6. Richard Howard. "May Swenson". Tri-Quarterly 7(1966)p.119

7. Cornelia Draves and Mary Fortunat, "Craft Interview with May Swenson" (New York Quarterly 19,1977)p.14

8. Knox, p.775

9. Ibid.,p.776

10. Karla Hammond, "An Interview with May Swenson (Parnassus: Poetry in Review 7,1978)p.71

11. Susan Elizabeth Howe, "I Do Remember How It Smelled Heavenly": Mormon Aspects of May Swenson's Poetry" (Dialogue 29,1996)p.41

12. Ibid.,p.45

13. All reference to the poems of May Swenson are taken from this source, Paul Crumbley and Patricia M. Gantt eds., BODY MAY HOUSE, May Swenson's Work and Life (Utah: Utah State University, 2006

14. Ibid.p.88

15. Jean Gould, "May Swenson", Modern American Woman Poets, (New York: Dodd, Mead, Company, 1984), p.91

16. Paul Crumbley and Patricia M. Gantt, p.84

17. Ibid.,p.77

18. Ibid.,p.71

19. R.R. Knudson and Suzanne Bigelow eds., May Swenson: A Poet's Life in Photo (Long: Utah State University Press, 1969)p.23

20. Ibid.,p.21

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