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SWAN SONGS

By W. GEOFFREY ARNOTT

The silver Swan who living had no note,
When death approached unlocked her silent throat;
Leaning her breast against the reedy shore
Thus sung her first and last, and sung no more:
'Farewell all joys, O death come close my eyes,
More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise.'

(Anon., set to music by Orlando Gibbons)

The legend of the dying swan's melancholy song is given its first expression in extant Greek literature by Aeschylus in 458 B.C., and it has obsessed poets, commentators, and natural historians ever since. Poets like Tennyson may sing of the dying swan's 'music strange and manifold', unaffected by the scoffing doubts expressed by ancient scientists and modern editors of classical texts. But do dying swans really 'sing'? The answer has been known now for over a century and a half, and is mentioned briefly in one or two works on ancient zoology such as C. J. Sundevall's *Die Thierarten des Aristoteles* (Stockholm, 1863), p. 152, and O. Keller's *Die antike Tierwelt* (Leipzig, 1913; reprinted 1963), ii.215. English commentators on ancient texts and D'Arcy Thompson's standard *Glossary of Greek Birds* (second edition, London and Oxford, 1936; reprinted 1966), however, tend either to neglect or unscientifically to dismiss the correct explanation.¹ For this reason a restatement of the facts both ancient and modern seems advisable.

First, the legend itself. It appears first in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* 1444 f., where Clytemnestra compares to a swan the now dead Cassandra who has 'sung her last fatal lament'. In Plato's *Phaedo* 84 e–85 a Socrates is made to say that although swans sing in earlier life, they never do this so much or so beautifully as at the approach of death. Thereafter the legend quickly became a literary commonplace.² The author of the tenth book of the *History of Animals* attributed to Aristotle confirmed what Plato had written and added that 'dying swans in fact fly out into the open sea, and people sailing along the Libyan coast have come across many swans singing with a mournful voice, and they could see that several of them were dying' (615^b 2–5). By the third century B.C. the phrase 'to sing one's swan song' had already become a proverb (Chrysippus in Athenaeus, 14.616 b; cf. Polybius, 30.4.7 and 31.12.1, and the paroemiographers). Most of the classical references to the legend

add little or nothing to the accounts given by Plato and the Aristotelian corpus. In the second century A.D. the dream-writer Artemidorus introduced a variant that became especially popular with later poets (witness the words of the madrigal quoted at the beginning of this paper): the variant that swans do not sing at all until the approach of death (2.20).

Some ancient writers, of course, challenged the veracity of the legend, thereby revealing a creditable independence of view and a reliance on their own powers of observation worthy of real scientists. Alexander of Myndos, of whose ornithological work in the first century A.D. only a few fragments now remain, was evidently a careful and accurate observer. He was, for example, the first writer to point out the field marks distinguishing female from male quails (Athenaeus, 9. 392 c) and scops from little owls (391 b). On the legend of the dying swan he says (393 d–e) that he had actually followed many dying birds and had never heard them singing. Pliny the elder, who was a contemporary of Alexander, also dismisses the legend as false, on the score of ‘several tests’ (*H.N.* 10.32.63) that he or others had presumably made. About a century and a half later Aelian qualifies one of his accounts of the legend (*Ver. Hist.* 1.14) with a defensive ‘they say’, adding further that he himself had never heard a swan singing, ‘and perhaps nobody else has either.’

Which view is correct: that of the believers, like Plato and the Aristotelian corpus, or that of the sceptics, like Alexander of Myndos and Pliny? Before this question is, I trust, conclusively answered, it will be useful first to see it in its correct historical and geographical context, so far as the limitations on our information allow us to do so. To this end several points of varying degrees of importance need to be made.

The first point is one depressingly true for many species of Greek birds. The recent draining of many wetland habitats has led to a substantial decline in the numbers of swans to be seen in Greece. At the same time there is no evidence that the patterns of swan behaviour in ancient Greece differed in any vital way from that of their modern descendants. The same two species of swan are still to be found. These are (1) the mute swan (*Cygnus olor*), which today breeds as a wild bird only in Eastern Thrace but as recently as the beginning of this century was reported to breed as far south as Attica and Euboea; elsewhere in Greece and the islands it may occasionally be seen on passage and as a winter visitor. The other species is (2) the whooper swan (*C. cygnus*), which in most years is an uncommon passage migrant and a

winter visitor, although in exceptional circumstances the winter influx may be quite sizeable.³

Although the references to swans in ancient authors, however, indicate that they were seen far more often and in far more places than they are in Greece today, it is likely that they were never as familiar to—say—the average fourth-century-B.C. Athenian as they are to the average modern classicist of western Europe. The latter, accustomed as he is to seeing mute swans glide lazily over the calm surface of urban park lakes in quest of crumbs, may well have forgotten that the domestication of the mute swan goes back with certainty only to the tenth century in Britain, although the Romans may have attempted it. In ancient Greece, on the other hand, the mute swan was always a totally wild bird, less easily seen by the casual observer.⁴

This relative unfamiliarity with swans at close quarters may help to account for occasional startling errors over simple details of description. Euripides, for example, at *Ion* 163 gives his swan a 'bright red foot'. Even Samuel Johnson, whose references to birds are often as inaccurate as they are dogmatic, got this fact right, noting the 'black feet' of cygnets.⁵ But Johnson was describing domesticated birds in the menagerie at Versailles; Euripides presumably lacked an equivalent opportunity.

Either because of this relative unfamiliarity, or because the distinctions in appearance and behaviour between the mute swan and the whooper seemed to the ancient world to be of no significance, no Greek or Roman writer ever differentiated between the two species. Any modern bird-watcher can easily list the major points of distinction: shape and coloration of bill, the cant of the neck when the swans are swimming, the noises made by the two species. The mute swan, as its name indicates, is normally silent, but when breeding it can produce a variety of snorts and hisses. A shriller note, which can be loud and resonant, has occasionally been heard from truly wild (as opposed to semi-domesticated) mute swans in the breeding season. In flight, however, the powerful wing-beats of the mute swan produce a loud musical throb which I myself have heard clearly at a distance of 600 yards, and which is alleged to be audible for up to a mile. The whooper swan, on the other hand, calls both on land and in flight with a long bugle-like note, the second syllable higher pitched than the first, repeated several times in succession. The musicality of this note is a matter of opinion; one authority has compared it to 'silver bells', another to the sound of 'a clarionet when blown by a novice in music.'⁶ The wing-beats of the whooper in flight, however,

lack the resonance of the mute swan's, producing only the light swish common to many large birds.

The total failure by ancient writers to distinguish between the two species of swan accounts for much of the error and controversy in their descriptions. The many poets who celebrate the swan's loud or musical voice, for instance, clearly have the whooper in mind. This is sometimes made doubly plain by the delineative addition of a diagnostic feature, such as the fact that the bird is singing or calling in flight (e.g. pseudo-Hesiod, *Shield of Heracles* 314 ff.; Virgil, *Aen.* 7.700 ff.). Writers on the other hand who complain that swans 'croak quite unmusically and feebly, so that ravens and jackdaws are sirens by comparison' (Lucian, *Electr.* 5), or produce a proverb that 'swans won't sing till jackdaws are dumb' (Gregory Naz. *Epist.* 114; cf. also Erasmus, *Adagia* 3.3.97), have their experiences equally clearly limited to the snorts and hisses of the mute swan. Aristophanes perhaps chooses the most evocative word for his description of the mute swan's 'twanging' wings in flight (*Av.* 769 ff.), but he spoils his effect⁷ by combining with it in the same bird the whooper's call.

So much for the music of the living swan. And when it dies? The mute swan dies just as it lives, mutely. But the whooper, unlike the mute, has a remarkably shaped trachea, convoluted inside its breastbone;⁸ and when it dies, the final expiration of air from its collapsing lungs produces a 'wailing, flute-like sound given out quite slowly'.⁹ In modern times this dirge of the dying whooper was first attested by the great ornithologist Peter Pallas in Russia at the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ It has been more recently observed also in other species of wild swan with similarly convoluted tracheae. The American ornithologist Dr. Daniel Elliott once shot a whistling swan (*Cygnus columbianus*, the American subspecies of the Eurasian Bewick's swan) for the American Museum of Natural History, 'and as the bird came sailing down he was amazed to hear a plaintive and musical song, so unlike the call in life, which lasted until the bird reached the water.'¹¹

Legends relating to natural history can sometimes be shown to have grown out of—and embroidered—a single observation of a phenomenon. Is it legitimate therefore to guess that one Greek hunter, at an indefinable time before Aeschylus wrote his *Agamemnon*, succeeded in shooting a whooper swan, and described to his doubtless unbelieving fellows the melancholy music that came from the dying bird's trachea? Perhaps so, perhaps not; but in either event one pleasant irony remains. Plato's account of the legend at *Phaedo* 84 e–85 a, which has been pilloried as a fanciful fiction by most

scholars from Pliny and Alexander of Myndos through the ages right up to the present day (Scaliger, for example, dismissed it as an audacious invention of 'Greece, parent of falsehood'),¹² turns out to be precisely accurate in all its details.

NOTES

1. Thompson's *Glossary*, s.v. KYKNOΣ includes in its entry a useful bibliography of references to the legend in ancient authors and of more modern discussions from the sixteenth century onwards. Cf. also Erasmus, *Adagia* 1.2.54 and 3.3.97; H. O. Lenz, *Zoologie der alten Griechen und Römer* (Gotha, 1856), pp. 384 ff.—a work of remarkable achievement for its time; Gossen in *RE* s.v. *Schwan*, 782 ff.; N. Douglas, *Birds and Beasts of the Greek Anthology* (London, 1928), pp. 106 ff.; J. André *Les Noms d'oiseaux en latin* (Paris, 1967), s.v. *cygnus, olor*. Discussions about swans and their songs in modern commentaries of classical authors are legion; I have found the following most useful: Allen, Halliday, Sikes on *Hom. Hymn to Apollo* 21.1; Page on Alcman, *The Parthenaion* 100 f., Wilamowitz on Eur. *Heracles* 110.

2. e.g. Aelian, *N.A.* 2.32, 5.34, 10.36; [Aesop], *Fab.* 247 and 277 Hausrath; Dionysius, *De Aucupio* 2.20; [Moschus], *Ep. Bion.* 14 ff.; Oppian, *Cyn.* 2.548; Plutarch, *Mor.* 161 c; Cicero, *De Oratore* 3.2.6, *Tusc. Disp.* 1.30.73; Martial, 13.77; Ovid, *Met.* 14. 429 f., *Her.* 7.1 f. Seneca, *Phaedra* 302; Statius, *Silv.* 2.4.10.

3. O. Reiser, *Ornis balcanica* iii: *Griechenland und die griechischen Inseln* (Vienna, 1905), pp. 492 f.; A. Kanellis and others, *Catalogus Faunae Graeciae, pars ii: Aves* (Thessaloniki, 1969), p. 35. Orn. Soc. Turkey, *Bird Report 1970-73*, p. 45.

4. Domesticated stock was not in fact introduced into Greece until 1967 (Kanellis, loc. cit.).

5. Boswell's *Life*, on 22 Oct. 1775.

6. P. Pallas, *Zoographia rossico-asiatica* (St. Petersburg, 1811), ii.212 ff.; and T. Bewick *History of British Birds*⁶ (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1826), ii.268; respectively.

7. As do also the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 21.1 ff. (on which see the Allen-Halliday-Sikes commentary), and Virgil *Aen.* 1.393 ff. References to the music of the mute swan's wings alone, without any alleged vocal accompaniment, can be found in Pratinas, fr. 1.5 Bergk, and *Anacreontea*, 60A Edmonds; cf. Philostratus, *Imag.* 1.9.

8. Cf. especially P. A. Johnsgard, *Waterfowl, Their Biology and Natural History* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1968), pp. 31 f., and *Handbook of Waterfowl Behaviour* (London, 1965), p. 25.

9. H. F. Witherby and others, *Handbook of British Birds* (London, 1940) iii.169.

10. Loc. cit. in n. 6 above.

11. Cf. S. B. Wilmore, *Swans of the World* (Newton Abbot and London, 1974), pp. 129 f., from whom this quotation is taken.

12. Cited by Sir Thomas Browne, *Pseudoxia Epidemica* iii.27.