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Phaedian Swans: A study of the Apollonian swans in the swan poems of Rilke and Baudelaire

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Abstract: Since the classical age 'swan' has been a popular metaphor for poets and philosophers. The swan has traditionally been glorified either for the dying and melancholic song or for its association with Zeus in the classical myth. Many of the poets associated with modernism like Yeats, Lawrence, Mallarme, Baudelaire, Rilke and others have dealt with the metaphor of swan in their own distinctive ways. Two of them—Baudelaire and Rilke—wrote poems which bear the same title (*The Swan*) in their English translation and which portray the swan as Apollonian even amidst the typically modernist melancholia pervading the poems just as Plato's *Phaedo* philosophically represents the swan as prophetic and its dying song as celebratory rather than melancholic, quite in contrast with traditional interpretation. Through a close reading of the English translation of the swan poems of Baudelaire and Rilke this paper seeks to explore the similarities and difference in their respective treatment of the swan metaphor and to find out how these two modernist poets, instead of following the sexualized mythical representation, provide different mechanisms of extracting positive implication out of the overtly modernist landscape of alienation largely through the metaphor of the swan.

Keywords: Swan, *Phaedo*, Apollonian, Rilke, Baudelaire

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Swan as a metaphor has been used by poets and philosophers alike throughout the ages. As Edward A. Armstrong puts it, "Few birds or animals have played a more important part in the ritual and symbolism of

Europe and Asia than the swan and the goose" (54). Beginning with Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the myth of the melancholy song of the dying swan has dominated and perplexed the minds of poets and philosophers alike. According to Jeremy Bell and Michael Naas, Plato's dialogues which are "teeming with animals of every kind" need explanation of the images or examples of animals to understand their "strategic or rhetorical necessity as well as their philosophical significance" (2). Classical references to the swan are abundant in Plato, like that of Orpheus' choosing the life of a swan in rebirth towards the end of Plato's myth of Er in *Republic*. Quite contrary to the prevalent opinions of the melancholy song of the dying swan and of the myth of pagan annunciation involving the union of Leda and Zeus in the form of a swan, *Phaedo* represents the swans as embodiments of defiance and exhilaration. *Phaedo* is a record of discussion held in a prison cell where Socrates spent his last day with a few companions. The book's chief arguments are about death and immortality of the soul and it derives its title from its narrator Phaedo of Ellis, a young companion of Socrates, who was with him on his last day. In *Phaedo* Socrates compares himself to a prophetic swan that is not afraid of death. Socrates wants to convince Simmias and others that he is growing more content as he is approaching death. Socrates claims that swans, servants of the god of prophecy, Apollo, sing most sweetly before their death and yet men, who are themselves afraid to face death misrepresent their songs as essentially "sorrowful lament for death" (81). As the swans are "prophet birds of Apollo", they sing joyfully. Socrates claims, "I consider myself the swans' fellow slave, consecrated to the same god; to me the master has given prophecy no poorer than theirs, and I leave life no more despondent than they"(81). The swans of *Phaedo* are thus associated with wisdom, philosophy and maturity, serving as signs, as purveyor of truth. It is therefore justified to call the swans of *Phaedo* Apollonian.

In a brilliant article "Leda and the Modernists", Helen Sword discusses how the swans came to signify so many different issues and aspects in modernist poetry—for instance, the "cloak of language" (in Rilke's *Lida*) , "the mysterious, still grace that humankind achieves in death" (in Rilke's *The Swan*), the

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memories of youth (in Yeats' *The Wild Swans at Coole*), the poet himself (for Baudelaire and other symbolists) or the poem itself (in Mallarme's sonnet) (310). This paper concerns poems of two poets whose poems bear the same title in English translation- "The Swan". As Rilke and Baudelaire originally wrote in different languages, this paper will read their swan poems in English translation. The aim of this paper is to offer a close reading of the poems to probe into the points of similarities and difference and to argue that in spite of the modernist approach of the poets, swans are here more prophetic than apocalyptic in them and thus different from other poets associated with modernism who have written poems with similar titles. In Mallarme's "This virginal long-living lovely day" (the sonnet originally did not contain any title) the swan is caught in contradictory coexistence and so, the "question of coexistence, of separation from and identification with the surroundings, is unsolved in the poem" (McCombie xxv). The present article will explore how the contradictory positions of meaningless and lifeless present and that of happy or rather meaningful release are overcome in the poems of Rilke and Baudelaire in favor of the latter. In Lawrence's poem bearing the same title (*Swan*), the swan is not separated from the myth of Zeus and Leda and thus appears to be Dionysian: "Like Mallarme's swan, Lawrence's acts as a symbol of poetic language and poetic power; yet the wild, unmastered creature of his 1929 poem "Swan" represents not the domesticated purity of a symbolist idyll but a cosmic principle both sinister and regenerative" (Sword 310-11). The argument of this paper is that in contrast with the sexualization and Dionysian representation of the swan by other modernists like Yeats (*Leda and the Swan*) or Lawrence (*Swan*), or even Rilke himself (in *Leda*) the swan poems of Baudelaire and Rilke are Apollonian, in close affinity with the representation of swans in *Phaedo*. As both Rilke and Baudelaire are connected (albeit in different degrees) with modernism, their poems naturally deal with alienation and drudgery, but this paper will try to explore how the ultimate note of their poems is one of expansion of consciousness accompanied with wisdom, qualities with which the swans are associated with in *Phaedo*.

Baudelaire's swan is in exile like Victor Hugo to whom the poem is dedicated to or like the classical character Andromache who was in exile following the defeat of her husband. Most of the interpreters treat Baudelaire's poem as depicting typically modernist melancholia devoid of hope: "The condition of Paris is

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fragile; it is surrounded by symbols of fragility—living creatures (the black woman and the swan) and historical figures(Andromache, "widow of Hector and wife of Helenus"). What they share are mourning for what was and lack of hope for what is to come" (Benjamin 111). For Laure Katsaros all the images in this poem of Baudelaire are "brought together in the poem because they are all dreamlike ghosts, living in exile, united only in their being out of place" (46). But the typically modernist depiction of the swan's terrestrial present in an alien landscape is not all about Baudelaire's treatment of it. It is important to remember, as Rosemary Lloyd has shown that the phoneme '*cygne*' in French "evokes both the bird and a sign" (12). Though Lloyd thinks that the poem weds the "archetypal images of exile" with the "transitory or momentary view of the swan" (18), one should not miss the point that this poem lingers over the memory of the momentary view of the swan and this definitely adds up significance in the representation of the swan in the poem. The entire poem is built around the image of the swan, explaining the significance of the title itself: "It is the swan, displaced from river to street, which provides the link to contexts and sends the poet off on his meditation about exiles, his invocation of Ovid and Andromache" (Clements 297). Andromache is imprisoned in her memory and so is the poet, rooted in his memory of the "old Paris" (7). In contrast the swan that the poet recalls had escaped from a local menagerie. Following Chambers, Susan Blood notes that the swan's escape from the cage is"liberation" but also an "entrapment" and observes that the simultaneous 'entrapment' and 'freedom' of the swan symbolize the predicament of the modern subject (26). One may differ a bit from this assessment to interpret this liberation as just the beginning of the journey that the swan undertakes in the poem, a journey that finally allows it to emerge as protesting voice amidst impending gloom of desolation and despair. What is more, this primary release has happened much before the poet observes the swan in the present, projected towards an uncertain future. Among the various victims of exile, Andromache is doomed to mourn forever, while the poet himself can only brood over the relative stability of the human heart in comparison with the changing city. But the swan can imagine the filth to be "its own lovely lake" and cry for thunder and rain. The swan's cry definitely reads like protest. Roger Pearson thinks that this swan is "constrained to silent protest" in its "anguished perception of a godless universe" (421). But Pearson who agrees that Baudelaire makes the swan "an emblem of human ill-being" (423) misses the point

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that the swan's protest is neither silent nor ineffectual. That is why the poet is able to decipher the meaning of its protest. Though in the beginning expressions like "webbed feet", "dragging" feathers, "pecking at the drain" indicate extreme drudgery and alienation, the use of the adverb "obstinately" is significant. The swan with its "straining neck" and "voracious beak" is projected out and out against the "black and unconcerned sky" in a mood of lambasting God.

In the second section therefore, the poet becomes aware once again of the "great swan in torment". What follows then is a series of images and memories of exiles and perennial losers like that of the starving and rickety woman, withering orphans, prisoners and so on. The poet is endlessly musing as the swan is "endlessly longing." In the two sections there are different images of loss and exile, but only two of them—Andromache and the swan—are repeated and treated extensively in both sections. As Andromache's mourning is "enormous" in its majesty, the swan has 'enormous" wings. While Andromache was "dragged off", the swan's feathers were 'dragging'. There are however, potential points of divergence. While Andromache is depicted as "crouching blindly" the swan's cry finds its expression and echoes in the myths like that of Daedalus. The essence of this "inevitable myth' is heroic death and defiance in the face of death. The use of the adverb 'obstinately' as mentioned earlier finds the explication of its relevance here.

Eugene W. Holland explores how in Baudelaire's poem 'memory', instead of "reconciling the Poet with the new city" intensifies "his alienation from it" (159). But he is careful to observe that such melancholic alienation is "productive" (160). The poet's memory fails to make positive sense of the chaotic and fragmented present, but it generates extreme awareness of the agony of others, the empathetic sense of exile. Holland therefore says that the poem ends with a "note of exhilaration: a series of short clauses punctuated by exclamation marks, ending with a characteristic "still more" (161). Pearson also finds a positive creativity in this poem: 'And yet within that state of melancholy the poet's memory continues to do its creative work, if only by constructing new memorials to pain…" (69). Edward K. Kaplan notes a positive broadening of the poet's humanitarian concern in the poem: "The poet's identification with these wanderers, immigrants and political prisoners stimulates a multitude of other images of moral courage" (92). It is difficult to deny

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that the journey towards the typically Baudelairean empathetic awareness of the lives and sufferings of others began with the memory of the swan.

Such glorification of the swan marks Rilke's poem also. In Rilke's poem the swan is able to transcend its awkward movement of life and the utter incomprehensibility of death by "letting-himself-go" into the water. The "anxious" moment of transition is overcome by the sheer ease of floating together with the water of the "little wake of waves." The swan is quite justifiably likened to human being or the poet in particular but the expression "little wake of waves" may be read to signify the awakening of the swan in the face of death. Such awakening involves the acquisition of maturity and wisdom, indicated by its becoming infinitely "silent and self-possessed." The majesty of Baudelaire's swan accompanies Rilke's swan also as the latter moves on through its "majestic way." Rilke's swan is able to restore its natural habitation but its celebration is calm and composed, sobered and serene. Rilke's swan is able to exercise its choice as is reflected in the active "letting-himself-go/ into the water" while Baudelaire's swan can only express its protesting voice.

That the swan in Rilke's poem is a metaphor for human being epitomizing the correlation of life's burden and death's ease is undeniable. But the way the image of the swan pervades the poem after the initial description of personal "misery" or collective failure of understanding death and finds an epiphanic moment of release in the end justify the choice of the title of Rilke's poem. Luke Fischer correctly observes that "a careful analysis of this poem reveals that the primary or foreground sense is the animal itself, in this instance the swan" (247). In her discussion of Rilke's poetry Emily Grosholz criticizes Rilke's characteristic mysticism that "orients itself towards an angelic unity" (424). She considers such striving towards a totalitarian unity as essentially "playful or ironic" in the conditions of modernity (425). In her view Rilke's *The Swan* is "linguistically autoerotic" built on excessive emphasis over pathetic fallacy and chiasmus (429). She thinks that Baudelaire's swan poem which represents "imagination and human charity as ways of knowing and loving in the absence of the old constitutors" is a "successful counterpart" to Rilke's poem (431). Grosholz believes that Baudelaire particularizes the situation of the swan by its simultaneous

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identification with and detachment from human predicament while Rilke's sole objective is to enforce the swan's identification with human being. Since she compares both poems in detail it is necessary to understand and re-assess her arguments. She thinks that Baudelaire's poem distances human being from the swan as the former can imaginatively recreate their "home somewhere" by "projecting" themselves "into the past and future, and over the next horizon" (431). Baudelaire's poem does not enable the poet to imaginatively recreate any 'home' out of the overwhelming memories, rather problematises the dichotomy of home/exile as the "mind's eye" of the beginning becomes "mind's exile" in the end and the humanitarian home, if any home is recreated, is found among the homeless. Rilke's poem, on the other hand, allows the human to be subsumed under the impactful floating of the swan instead of forcing any unity of the two, by its emphasis on the transitional moment or twilight zone of death, the calm and composed acceptance of which cannot but make the swan akin to the Apollonian swan of *Phaedo*. C.F. MacINTYRE perfectly captures the essence of this "truly Rilkean moment" marked by "the entrance of an awkward being into that mystery in which it not only becomes more beautiful, but in which its forward movement seems to be the mature fulfillment of the meaning of life" (136).

The use of various metaphors in Plato's dialogues mark the movement from "the animal to the human or the quasi-divine, from the literal gadfly to the metaphorical or philosophical one, from blindness to insight or body to soul, from a natural impulse to philosophical foresight" (Naas 56). Naas argues that such overt philosophizing of commonplace animals should have enabled the name 'swan' to signify "not simply and perhaps not primarily a bird endowed with prophetic powers but a human gifted with philosophical foresight" and opines that this has not happened. But in the swan poems of both Baudelaire and Rilke we find that the swan metaphor coupled with the predicament of human beings help the emergence and growth of philosophical insight. S. Montgomery Ewegen observes that Socrates likens himself with swans to "better understand *himself*, a likening that thus lets him live more in accord with the dictum "know thyself" that is attributed to the very god of the swans, Apollo" (81). In both Baudelaire and Rilke the swan actually helps the poet/speaker in exile to come to terms with himself in their distinctive ways- by the Nietzschean mode of reproaching gods and triggering empathy for the losers and the marginalized (in Baudelaire) and by

validating the possibility of wisdom and maturity at the cost of undertaking what later philosophers have designated as the leap of faith (in Rilke). Both poems, by celebrating the Apollonian virtues of the swan successfully distil the eternal out of the transitory in full conformity with the aesthetic of modernity that Baudelaire himself framed.

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