

Lohengrin

Notes for a talk presented at the Los Angeles Branch of the Anthroposophical Society on

10/23/2010

Introduction

When I returned home after our last meeting here on Parzival, where we decided to meet again for Lohengrin, I reviewed Wagner's opera "Lohengrin" in my opera guide and was struck by several facts.

Firstly, the legend seemed to have a Rosicrucian connection through the fact that Lohengrin appears mysteriously at a time of need; by wanting to stay anonymous; and he disappears when he has to reveal his name. He is also known for his deed, rather than through teaching – a mark of the Rosicrucians

Secondly, the story as presented to us by Wolfram von Eschenbach, falls roughly into the time of Christian Rosenkrenz's initiation, and a new impulse in cultural evolution – i.e. the freeing of the individual from former traditions and family/tribal bonds through the founding of cities..

Thirdly, the swan motif is the symbol of a certain stage of initiation, and in some versions Lohengrin appears in a boat pulled by a swan, but he disappears in a boat pulled by a dove – a Christian symbol.

When I mentioned these ideas to Jane, she said why don't you do some research and present your findings in the 10/23 meeting. I knew very little about the subject, but since I like a challenge I set to work. Little did I know what a vast subject this was and how much the scholarly research is based on conjectures which often differ significantly from expert to expert. Soon I saw three distinct areas, that is: time frames, for exploring. All three, elucidated by the spiritual insights of Rudolf Steiner, made them meaningful and applicable to our present age. They are:

- 1) The **mythical, timeless** background of the saga in the Swan legends.
- 2) The treatment of the saga in literature emerging in the Middle Ages, especially as presented by Wolfram von Eschenbach, but now in **historical context**.
- 3) The re-emergence of the subject after hundreds of years of dormancy in Richard Wagner's opera – now in **modern times**.

Another aspect of three-foldness occurred to me while reading George Bernard Shaw's "The Perfect Wagnerite." You probably know Shaw's penetrating style and analysis. He says that,

among many other reasons, Richard Wagner was able to create the perfect new style of opera, - The Music Drama, - was the fact, that he wrote his own libretto and did not have to rely on second-rate libretto writers to do this for him, whose style other composers had to interpret in music. In this way, says Shaw, Richard Wagner could add thinking to the creation of opera – in fact could create the Music Drama.

Considering this remark, it seems to me that we can see another three-foldness:

- 1) The **willing element** in the mythological background of the Swan Saga which occurred during the time of Nature religions.
 - 2) The **feeling element** in the Christian mood of the Wolfram creation of the Parzival epic, which contains Lohengrin.
 - 3) The **thinking element** in Richard Wagner's Music Drama.
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You see, since scholars employed a lot of conjectures, I allowed myself to state some conjectures of my own. But foremost we must be grateful to Rudolf Steiner, who sheds light on the subject from a higher plane. Without his interpretation for us, we could not fathom the depths of the myths and legends and their meaning for our time.

The Planning Group decided to concentrate in today's report on the mythical and the medieval background of the Swan-Knight Lohengrin, and bring out in the 11/6 talk Richard Wagner's contributions to the theme. However, I want to start with a synopsis of Richard Wagner's Lohengrin to show the overarching context of the three approaches. After all, these two meetings were prompted by the upcoming performance of this opera in Los Angeles.

Synopsis of Acts I, II, III (Synopsis was read at the talk. Please refer to any opera guide)

Mythological Background

Rudolf Steiner tells us that mythologies contain great truths. They are remembrances of a time when the stories of human evolution were given to people by their priests in pictures. These great initiates could read in the Akashic Chronic which is a spiritual record, where all events of the physical world are inscribed.

The Swan-Knight legend as we know it today is a development of the 12th and 13th century, but its mythical elements reach back to primitive, nature-worshipping days in Europe. The most widely disseminated element in this myth is the Swan. Celts considered the swans messengers of the god of light, warmth and growth. They endowed them with the power of prophecy and song. Swans sing most beautifully before they die – therefore the term swan-song. Scholars believe that the swan legends have their origin in this nature mythology of the Celts who

occupied the lower regions of the Rhine and Belgium (map) – an area ideally suited for a resting place for the migrating swans.

As a matter of fact, the word Rhein – for the Rhein River – is a Celtic word, meaning “stream.” The Celts associated the coming and going of the pure white swan, which coincided with the returning light of spring and the waning light of fall with their principal god of light and warmth.

In Germanic mythology swans also play an important role. Germanic tribes migrated to that area approx. 100 BC and most likely accepted into the religious belief of their own god of light the Celtic belief that swans are messengers of warmth, light and life. In Germanic mythology Swan-Maidens are also depicted. E.g. the semi-divine valkyries are messengers and servants of the gods. They have power of prophecy and of transforming themselves into swans. Herzeleide and Repanse de Schoie are considered Swan-Maidens. Wolfram von Eschenbach shows their status as highly evolved spiritual beings in the fact that both had been given as spouses to rulers of foreign lands and to becoming mothers of Grail Knights. **(MORE RESEARCH NEEDED)** Swan-children are also a wide-spread theme. They are born of Swan-Mothers (or maidens) from whom they inherit their power to transform themselves into swans, and wear a gold chain around their neck. We find these in various fairytales. In fact the word myth of pre-historic times, evolved into the word Maehre (the German word equivalent to legend); and then into Maerchen (our English fairytale). Another three-foldness development.

Middle Ages

In the Swan-Knight legend of the Middle Ages the swan assumes a new character. We see here a development, a contracting from the MANY in the Celtic nature religions - the swan children -, to the FEW– the swan maidens -, to the ONE in the Swan-Knight legend.

The strongest stream of medieval prose and poetry was the Celtic background with three independent traditions:

1. The Great Fool Story (we know as Parzival)
2. The Arthurian myth
3. The Talisman Spear and Cup - the Grail myth

Between 1140 and 1240 these traditions were interwoven and became parts of the Arthurian cycle.

This cycle was the strongest and drew to it many of the originally independent hero tales and other elements. Arthur supposedly lived near the close of the 5th cent. AD. He may have even been legendary then, but he caught the imagination of his time. Geoffrey of Monmouth gave the first full literary account of Arthur in abt. 1147. Some scholars say that it was a stupendous

delusion of free imagination. Arthur is depicted as chivalrous king and hero, guarded (endowed) with supernatural powers; a man of marvelous life and tragic death. Malory's "Morte d'Arthur" (printed in 1485), the compilation of French Arthurian legends, became the source material of modern writers.

However, RS tells us that the figure of Arthur was a great initiate and leader of the White Lodge, who lived secluded with his 12 worldly Knights of the Round Table in Wales.

Many Celts fled from Britain to the continent (map) after the Saxon invasion during the 5th/6th cent. AD. This led to the division of Anglo-Norman and Norman-French development in literature.

An interesting aside is this: As the Celts have been mentioned so far, we considered a tribe that resided in the Lower Rhine Valley of Germany/Belgium/France as immigrants from England, who therefore had moved south. However, my German dictionary describes the Celts as having inhabited So. Germany and Bohemia (map), who migrated across the Rhine and who therefore moved north. I found this especially interesting, because Paul Allen in the footnotes to his translation of the Autobiography of Rudolf Steiner mentions that near Rudolf Steiner's birthplace are the ruins of castle Gandein that by traditional folklore was the birthplace of Parzival and his ancestors. In addition, scholar Robert Jaffrey, in his book "The Two Knights of the Swan – Lohengrin and Helyas" (page 96) states that the earliest known version places the opening scene of Helyas/Lohengrin (without them being mentioned by name) on the borders of Hungary, geographically near Gandein. There is also a castle Hohenschwanstein in that general area (Bavaria), and the Bavarian king and benefactor of Richard Wagner, Ludwig II, built his castle Neuschwanstein, nearby. However I have not been able to pursue these connections as of yet.

The Grail Myth

is also of pagan origin, of nature worship, pointing to cauldrons in which bottles or cups appear with power to preserve or to increase food and the power to sustain or preserve life. Grail, lance and Rich Fisher is the Spirit of Celtic Folklore. The Christian Grail origin is traced to Joseph of Arimathea. It is said that he he supposedly used the vessel, which was used at the Last Supper, to receive the blood of Christ on the cross. The appearance of the Grail is always accompanied by the Spear of Longinus who pierced the Savior's side. This Holy Vessel is supposedly kept in the Grail Castle on Mont Salvat in Spain where it is guarded by 12 spiritual Christian knights of the White Lodge, in contrast to the White Lodge of the worldly Knighthood in Wales. The task of the Grail knights, in short, is to develop the divine spark in human beings and to raise it to higher worlds. In other words to develop the inner sanctity of the human soul. Baptism is a symbolic picture of this.

There also a profound picture occurs: This vessel, this Grail, was used in pre-Christian times by nature-worshipping people; then Christ used it to consecrate the wine, a product of nature, to be the semblance of his blood; but later a man, Joseph of Arimathea, uses it to hold Christ's actual blood. In other words, the Grail was transformed from its pre-Christian appearance to the living Christian reality – (food for meditation).

The Grail story is woven of many strands. One of those Grail knights was Lohengrin.

Lohengrin in French Literature

The name Lohengrin most likely stems from the Province Lothringen, an area between France and Germany (map).

French were the first to embody the Swan-Knight story in written literature, extolling the courtly life and the deeds of Geoffrey of Bouillon, the leader of the first crusade, conqueror and King of Jerusalem (died 1000 AD). Chretien de Troyes wrote his epic abt. 1150-1189, but died before he could complete it. It was completed by two different writers, one was presumably his brother. There exist also many stories on the subject written by others. These stories can be found today as fragments in various monasteries, churches and museums throughout Europe.

The Germans and French were closely associated and the Germans adapted the French courtly style, but infused it with their own national ideals of morality, loyalty, steadfastness and generosity.

Lohengrin in German literature

Wolfram von Eschenbach introduced a new element to the Arthur cycle, the Great Fool Story and the Grail myth, in his *Parzival*. He completed the elaborate and long drawn out adventures of his hero Parzival with a simple and very brief account of the adventures of Loherangrin (Lohengrin), Parzival's son and Knight of the Holy Grail, whom God sent to the Duchess of Brabant in a boat drawn by a swan, to become the ruler of that country and the husband of its mistress.

The Swan-Knight Legend or Lohengrin story is one of the most beautiful legends in Germanic literature of the Middle Ages. There are many phases of this subject. The early treatment in the French romances was followed by the development of the 5 Germanic versions:

1. *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach (WvE)
2. *Der Schwanritter* by Konrad von Wuerzburg (KvW)
3. *Der Lohengrin* of the Wartburgkrieg (WK) – competition of the minstrels
4. *Der Lorengel*
5. *Lohengrin*, an opera by Richard Wagner (LbyRW)

The Swan Legend, Its Origins and Ramifications

As we see, the Swan-Knight legend in literature is a development of the 12th and 13th century, but its mythical and legendary elements reach back to primitive, nature-worshipping days of our ancestors. The most widely disseminated element in the legend is the Swan. The form of a swan may conceal an angel. The Swan in Lohengrin of the Wartburgkrieg and in Lorengel is an angel. In Wolfram von Eschenbach's Lohengrin the swan is not directly mentioned as an angel, but his divine nature is suggested. It guides the Knight sent by the Holy Grail in answer to prayer. And there are many other legends where angels are depicted as swans. In Lohengrin by Richard Wagner the swan is the transformed brother of the heroine. Rudolf Steiner also mentions that a certain stage of initiation is designated as the stage of the Swan.

In the Swan-Knight legend the swan assumes a new character. The French romances and the German versions differ somewhat. In the German versions the swan is an angel sent by God, and the knight he guides is a Knight of the Grail. The knight and the swan are also brothers. The features common to both German and French versions are as follows: At some place on the lower Rhine or some neighboring stream, where dwells a lady of high degree in dire need of a protector, a fair and handsome knight suddenly appears in a little boat drawn by a swan by means of a gold or silver chain. As soon as the knight has landed the swan departs. The knight becomes the champion of the lady and frees her of her enemies. He marries her (or the daughter in case both mother and daughter are persecuted) on condition that she never ask his name or parentage on pain of losing him. The promise is readily given and after the lapse of some time, during which children are born, is inevitably broken. As soon as the forbidden question is asked the swan reappears with the boat. The knight leaves his wife a horn with magic power (sometimes also a ring and a sword), enters the boat, departs with the swan and is seen no more.

However, now ONE swan of the Celtic MANY attends the coming and going of the of the god (knight).

As I said: The French were the first to embody the Swan-Knight story in written literature. Their version glorifies Godfrey of Bouillon who is supposed to have had a Swan-Knight father. The story extols the courtly life and the deeds of Godfrey, the leader of the first crusade and conqueror of Jerusalem. The connection of the history of Godfrey and the swan-children-knight story is, however, loose and forced.

The English "Sceaf" version has neither a knight nor swans.

The swan is sometimes called Elias or Helyas. I will come to this later.

German: Wolfram von Eschenbach's version of the Swan-Knight legend

First German version of the Swan-Knight legend is found in Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parzival and Lohengrin. Rudolf Steiner says that the whole essence of the newly blossoming of Christianity lives in these two legends. They express the most inward being of Christianity – brotherliness, equality, overcoming of traditions based on name, title and possession, overcoming the worldly knighthood of Arthur's Round Table and supplanting it with the spiritual, Christian knighthood of the Grail.

I want to preface this section with remarks by Rudolf Steiner about Wolfram von Eschenbach and his time:

The influence of the Holy Grail gradually began to increase towards the end of the 13th century. This is a turning point in the civilization of Europe.

It is the time of the founding of cities. In contrast to feudal and agricultural societies, in cities personal ambition and character were valued higher than family background or tradition. This allowed personal freedom to develop. It necessitated, as well as facilitated, a radical change in the life and way of thinking. The legends of Parzival and Lohengrin embodied the message of the highest reward obtainable after many years of striving, of steadfastness and faith. These stories were a vehicle to influence this new way of thinking. Rudolf Steiner said, that the whole essence of the new blossoming of Christianity lives in these two legends.

Wolfram von Eschenbach was one of the great initiates who could read in the Akashic Record and see the approach of this new development. He could characterize this time in its connection with higher spheres. Some of the qualities to be able to read in the Akashic Record are homelessness, that is: having ones home in the Spiritual World and not on Earth; complete Selflessness, that is: not to let personal thinking and prejudices enter the mind. The initiate has to offer his own thoughts and forces to the beings of higher worlds (the Masters). He must develop the God within him. E.g. monks of the Middle Ages were able to sacrifice their own intellectuality to explain the Revelations as given in the New Testament.

With his idea of catharsis, already Aristotle characterized the initiation into the workings and laws of karma as the task of the poet. In Wolfram this is also obvious in the fact that he did not invent his literary subjects, but selflessly interpreted existent great spiritual truths for his time. (Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides fall into this category too) In contrast, the French romances glorified the houses of nobilities (which also surfaces in the story of Lohengrin of the Wartburgkrieg - which, according to scholars is not from Wolfram).

Wolfram von Eschenbach, a Bavarian Knight (approx. 1170-1220) was called the German Homer. His Parzival is a part of the Great Fool story, but now transformed, because after years

of earnest striving Parzival attained the highest reward of steadfastness and faith, the kingship of the Holy Grail. Gurnemanz taught Parzival the knightly ways and sent him into the world in defense of innocence and right. Parzival went to Pelaran where Queen Kondwiramur (another Swan Maiden?) was besieged by enemies (another Swan-Knight?). He lifted the siege and married Kondwiramur . Castle Monsalvaesch (Grail castle) can only be found by those who are worthy. Trevrezant tells Parzival of the race of the Grail kings. Kondrie tells Parzival that he, Queen Kondwiramur and his son Lohengrin are summoned to Monsalvaesch.

Scholar Jessie Weston says: “Of all the romances of the Grail cycle there is but one which can be presented, in its entirety, to the world today with the conviction that its morality is as true, its human interest as real, its lesson as much needed now as it was seven hundred years ago, and that romance is the Parzival of Wolfram von Eschenbach.”

My German dictionary says that the epos *Parzival* is the first novel showing the character development in which earthly knighthood is infused with spiritual striving .

The Lohengrin Episode in the Parzival

The importance of Wolfram’s version of the Swan-Knight legend: this version is believed to be the first and oldest in which the legend is connected with the Grail myth. Scholar Bloete thinks that Wolfram’s purpose of adding the Swan-Knight legend to the Parzival was to give a concrete example of God’s sending a Grail knight secretly to become the ruler of a foreign land. Wolfram had previously given 2 examples of Grail maidens being given to rulers of foreign lands:

Herzeleide to King Kastis (she later married Gamuret) and Repanse de Schoie to Feirefez. So far no Knight had been mentioned.

In his epic *Parzival* Wolfram von Eschenbach gives only a short account of Lohengrin. Of how Parzival, after many knightly deeds gets re-united with his wife, Queen Kondwiramur. And there he meets for the first time his two sons: Kardeiss and Lohengrin. Parzival asks the assembled knights: “Who of these boys shall be king over your lands?” And pointing to Kardeiss he said: “This one shall inherit all the lands I inherited from my father Gachmuret. I myself inherited with blessedness the Grail.” Kardeiss was crowned king right then, and two little hands distributed the lands among the nobles. And they departed with the young king who was then brought up by Kyot. And the Templars took Lohengrin and his parents to Munsalwaesche. Then follows the story how they arrived there and were greeted by Amfortas and Feirefess, the half-brother of Parzival, as well as Repanse de Schoye, the sister of Amfortas. Wolfram says that the Grail let itself be carried only by Repanse – herself a Swan Maiden as we saw before. Feirefess, however, cannot see the Grail, but only saw a piece of Achmardiseide (not in dictionary) Parzival and the Grail Knights try to persuade Feirefess to let himself be baptized, but he refuses. Only when he falls in love with Repanse and he asks: if I let myself be baptized,

will that help me to obtain Repanse as my wife? The answer was yes, he got baptized, and then he was able to see the Grail. The two went to India, where Repanse bore a son, she named John (Johann) who was later called Priester Johann (Prester John). Since that time the kings there were known by that name.

Then follows the story of Lohengrin. Wolfram says: Lohengrin grew into a strong man. He was never despondent. He attained fame in the service of the Grail. In this time there ruled a lady over a land. She was without deceitfulness, without any earthly desires. Many worthy knights wooed her, but she accepted none of them. She was accused for this, but she trusted in God that he will send the right man for her. She was the princess of Brabant. The one that was brought by the Swan, the One that God had meant for her was sent from Monsalwaesche. He was pulled on land at Antwerp. He was handsome and without a fault. He said: "My lady, to be here the Lord of the land, I have to leave behind nothing less. I must ask you: Never ask who I am, then I can stay with you. But if you ask who I am, you have lost me. If you do not heed this warning, God will warn me and He knows wherefore." She gave her woman's word as a surety. So they got married and he became prince of the land, he was a good judge and did many knightly deeds. They also had beautiful children. There are still many people alive who know about the two, how she welcomed him, and how her question drove him from the land, and how he was sad to leave the place. Now, his friend the swan brought him a small boat. As a present he left behind a sword, a horn and a ring. This is how Lohengrin left. And we have to add, that this was Parzival's son. **He traveled on water and on land until he came again to the service of the Grail.**

Lohengrin of Wolfram as Knight of the Grail represents the highest ideal of knighthood; as future King of the Grail, the highest ideal of spiritual achievement on Earth.

As we will see, this brief account varies some from later treatments of the Lohengrin story.

Der Schwanritter by Konrad of Wuerzburg (approx. 1230-1287)

Konrad wrote his poem 50 years after Wolfram. It exists as fragment and is a marvelous tale. Its nucleus is Wolfram's version, its purpose is to glorify the houses of Cleve and Geldern.

Features differing from Wolfram are: the Swan-Knight is not a Grail Knight; he is anonymous; he leaves no tokens with wife and children; both mother and daughter are persecuted; knight engages in single combat with enemy. Descendants of the Swan-Knight are the houses of Cleve, Geldern, and Rinick.

Similarities with Wolfram: Though Konrad's Swan-Knight is not a Grail knight, his divine origin is suggested, and the poem has a definite Christian background; his Swan-knight retains the high

moral tone of Wolfram's; Swan-Knight becomes the ruler of Brabant; swan-children introduction is omitted.

The Lohengrin of the Wartburgkrieg

belongs to the period of the 7 masters. It is a greatly elaborated version of Wolfram's account of the Swan-Knight legend. Some scholars believe that Wolfram was the author, but others believe that two different authors (not Wolfram) wrote the account. Telramund, brave and powerful, is famous for having killed the Swedish dragon, but fame went to his head, he became presumptuous and faithless in his trust – resulting in his shameful end. This story has many inventions of false historical occurrences.

Main purpose of the poem: the glorification of the Saxon emperor as well as Duke Henry of Bavaria.

In Wartburgkrieg Lohengrin lost his spiritual attributes of Wolfram's version: he has a temper and was in great danger of succumbing to the charms of another lady, etc.

Lorengel

Is a deterioration of the Meisterlieder based on Lohengrin. Introduces the Ursula legend.

Helyas

The French romances sometime call Lohengrin Helyas. I found little information explaining this. But here is my own interpretation: the French writers confuse Lohengrin, the Knight of the Holy Grail with the Swan who pulls his boat. What makes me think this is the fact that the swan supposedly is the enchanted brother of Elsa of Brabant whom she is accused of having murdered, while he was actually enchanted by Ortrud (whom we know from the opera by Richard Wagner). His enchantment was lifted by Lohengrin. Elsa's brother's name was Gottfried, the equivalent of the French Godfrey. I sense there a connection with the Godfrey of Bouillon, so that this Godfrey may be the Helyas. Another point to consider is the fact that in some versions Lohengrin arrives in a boat pulled by a swan (Gottfried/Godfrey?), but he departs in a boat pulled by a dove after Gottfried's release from enchantment.

The opera Lohengrin by Richard Wagner

will be the subject of our meeting on 11/6. However, I want to add my own feelings about this opera at this point. I consider *Lohengrin* the 5th in a cycle of Music Dramas that started with *Rheingold*, representing the transition from the Atlantean to the post-Atlantean period; *Valkyrie* representing the first post-Atlantean; *Siegfried* the second post-Atlantean; *Goetterdaemmerung* the third post-Atlantean; *Parzival* the fourth post-Atlantean; and

Lohengrin the fifth (our own) post-Atlantean period. As mentioned before, scholar Jessie Weston considers the message given us by the legend of Lohengrin absolutely necessary for our time.

Conclusion

The Origin of the Swan-Knight Legend:

Although various theories of the origin of the Swan-Knight story have been advanced in this study, each of which has some plausible basis, all are more or less conjectures which offer nothing definite. Unless newer manuscripts are found, the legend will probably remain in obscurity. When the legend first appeared in written literature at the end of the 12th century, it was already well developed.

The French were the first to introduce the Swan-Knight legend into extant written literature, incorporating it into the romances extolling the military exploits of Godfrey of Bouillon, the hero of the First Crusade. Helyas, the Swan-Knight, was one of the seven swan-children of the folk tale, who had inherited his swan nature from his swan-maiden mother, and who in the romances becomes the grandfather of Godfrey. The swan-children background gives the early French version a pagan background.

The German Swan-Knight

Germans were enthusiastic imitators of the French, both in literature and lifestyle. And they drew on the French for both form and material, material which the French themselves had borrowed from other sources. The German poets wrought this borrowed material into epics and romances which became expressions of their own national and domestic ideals. Thus it is that the Swan-Knight legend, while retaining its basic features, is developed along completely new lines by the German poets. Lohengrin, the German Swan-Knight is a purely Christian inception, symbolical of the Divine dependence on human love and faith, and expressive of Divine love as manifested on earth in unselfish service to mankind. He is a Grail Knight whose ancestors have been Grail Kings. While yet a child the Holy Grail itself had chosen him to become his father Parzival's successor as King of the Grail. The Grail Kingdom was accessible only to those who had faith in God and who were steadfast and true. The German Swan-Knight has no connection with the swan-children folk tale. He owes his title solely to the fact that a swan guided him on his mission of protection. The earliest extant German version, written scarcely 20 years after the French version, is briefly told in the closing episode in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. The high rank of the characters, their physical beauty and noble bearing, all fit perfectly into the romantic spirit of the time. The spiritual significance which the author has given the Swan-Knight reflects the religious zeal which characterized the age, and which found its most enthusiastic expression in the Crusades.

Thoughts to ponder

The mystery remains – who was this highly evolved being that appeared in the 12th/13th century to inaugurate a new cultural development, and then re-appeared, heralding a new cultural turning point in human evolution in the 19th century, through Richard Wagner's Lohengrin?

Gertrud K. Kohler