

Cultural Heritage, Art and Politics in Wagner's *Lohengrin* A Dialectical Reinterpretation

Abstract: The “forbidden question” – leitmotif of so many legends since the Antiquity – is staged by Wagner in an opera portraying the medieval story of Lohengrin, the son of Parsifal (the King of the Grail). Elsa, the main feminine character, violates, as happens in all the legends, the interdiction. The thesis I will prove in the present paper is the following: the fact that Elsa, although she was warned of the consequences, asks the mysterious Knight who saved her and who she married to confess who he is and whence he came, does not situate her outwards the ideal of *eternal feminine* (*das Ewig-weiblich*) – sought by the romantics and by the composer himself. I claim, contrary to the most interpretations which state that Wagner's opera develops the symbolism of the binomial “transcendent virtues – corruptibility and the fickleness of the terrestrial world”, that the interdiction to ask is not a criterion to determine whether or not Elsa is the feminine reflection of Lohengrin (in order to be possible their absolute union). On the contrary, in my opinion, the true moral imperative is precisely the opposite: to ask the question! This fact becomes clearer if we notice that the main conflict of Wagner's *Lohengrin* is, in fact, a dialectical-historical one (in the Hegelian sense) i.e. the conflict between the contradictory political entities of the Duchy of Brabant. Regarded through the prism of dialectics, Elsa proves out not to be the symbol of fickleness, but, like Brünnhilde (from *The Ring of the Nibelungs* – Siegfried), Senta (from *The Flying Dutchman*) or Elisabeth (from *Tannhäuser*), a saviour.

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The Duchy of Brabant, the 10th century. Heinrich I, the first King of the German States, comes to call the nobles to fight the Hungarians, but finds himself in the midst of a conflict of succession. Friedrich von Telramund, advised by his wife Ortrud, accuses Elsa (the heiress of the throne) of fratricide, committed in complicity with a secret lover. As the protector of Gottfried – Elsa's disappeared brother who was supposed to become Duke – Friedrich asks the King to appoint him as the new leader of the Land.

The above political-amorous intrigue is staged by Wagner in the First Act of the opera *Lohengrin*. Then follows the process, during which King Heinrich realises he will not be able to reach a rationally founded verdict.

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He has no other option than to appeal to the divine justice: the guilty to be designated through a fight. Elsa falls to her knees, prays, and then the miracle happens (“ein unerhörtes, nie gesehenes Wunder!”, *A miracle has happened, a miracle never before seen or heard!* – the nobles exclaim): a mysterious Knight brought by a swan offers to help her, with one condition: never to ask him to reveal his identity and the place whence he came: “Nie sollst du mich befragen!” (*You shall never ask me!*)

As expected, Elsa accepts the pact. She promises to marry him: “Mein Held, mein Retter! Dir geb ich alles, was ich bin” (*I give you all that I am!*), being fully aware of the sexual implications of this act: “Geb 'ich dir Leib und Seele frei” (*I freely give you my body and my soul*). The Knight defeats Friedrich. The next day he marries Elsa. The morning after, the literary motif of “forbidden question” gets the same denouement as in all the legends: the pact is violated. At the request of his wife, the Knight confesses, in front of Heinrich and of the army prepared to go to the battle, that he is Lohengrin, the son of Parsifal – the King of the Grail, came from Mount Monsalvat to bring justice. The secret being compromised, he is forced to return immediately, while Elsa dies.

I will not dwell on the events happened between the moment of the promise and that of the confession, nor on the multiple meanings of Wagner’s operas: the symbolism of the antagonisms: divine – mundane, old magical pagan religion (Ortrud) – Christianity, purity – terrestrial fickleness, spiritual love – sensorial passion (the dilemma of the romantics); about Lohengrin and the ideal of virtue, or as a symbol of the artist who wishes to be understood and accepted – the alter ego of Wagner (the composer explicitly affirms this connotation). What intrigues me is something much simpler: why Elsa should not have to ask?

In the Romanian cultural space, there is a story with a similar theme. The husband, endowed with magical powers (he builds overnight a bridge decorated with precious stones and transforms the shabby house of his parents into a castle) also hides a secret, whereof his lover is forbidden to ask. Yet, this time, it is the King who grants him his daughter’s hand, as a reward for his deeds, without her to consent beforehand. And differs also something else: the husband is a pig. Fortunately for the princess, he undresses his animal skin during the night, thus turning himself into a handsome man. The reason she no longer resists, violates the pact and burns the pigskin is obvious. As a consequence, the husband disappears. She is forced to look for him, thus going through a long formative journey. At the end, she saves the Prince from the curse and receives forgiveness.

Elsa does not face such a situation. It is not the lack of life experience that makes her ask the forbidden question, he does not suffer from pure curiosity as Pandora, nor feels an uncontrollable desire to feel the divine nature of her lover in its fullness, as happens in the romance between

Semele and Zeus. On the contrary, she has a religious vision upon life and reflects all the high ideals and moral standards that Lohengrin symbolises.

Secondly, their marriage is not arranged in advance, being imposed to her an unknown partner who, thereafter, might prove to be a good prince in pigskin or the evil King Bluebeard. Elsa already knew the Knight and was in love with him. The attraction did not result from an intentionally ambiguous game of seduction, which could have left behind many unanswered questions. On the contrary, their first meeting happened the only possible way her doubts would have been dispelled: at the occasion of an ecstatic vision provoked by prayer (the guarantee for the Knight's virtue). Ortrud does not understand this fact and accuses her of having a secret lover. King Heinrich, after seeing her transfigured, reliving his spiritual experience during the trial (aria "Einsam in trüben Tagen"), becomes more cautious and suggests Friedrich to reconsider his charges ("Friedrich, du ehrenwerter Mann, bedenke wohl, wen klagst du an?", *Friedrich, you honourable man, think carefully, whom are you accusing?*)

The appearance of Lohengrin represents, therefore, a reunion with her beloved, not a surprise. Elsa has no reason to inquire whether or not his future husband hides something bad. The musical composition is suggestive in this regard. The leitmotif of the Grail (the symbol of purity, justice and virtue) is repeated at the moment the Knight enters the scene. The forbidden question itself combines a grave musical theme ("Nie sollst du mich befragen, noch Wissens Sorge tragen...") with one similar to that of the Grail ("... woher ich kam der Fahrt, noch wie mein Nam und Art"), which rather suggests the nostalgia for the place he left ("I came from light, not from darkness" he confesses during their wedding night), than a danger, a menacing secret. The King believes Lohengrin, also the nobles from Brabant.

What made, therefore, Elsa to violate the pact and, of course, why such a pact was necessary? The answer: Lohengrin was part of the brotherhood of the Grail, whose regulations obliged him to remain anonymous does not seem to me to rend the essence of the problem. In this opera (which is a secondary story of the legend of Parsifal), the Grail does not have a strictly religious connotation. It rather symbolises a sum of values incarnated by the concrete human individual. Moreover, if it would have been only about an objective rule of anonymity, why is not allowed for Elsa the forgiveness and the redemption and must instantly die?

A second explanation: the future duchess was supposed to prove that virtue cannot be corrupted by the evil, stifling the seed of doubt sown by the stirrer Ortrud. This too seems to me incomplete. Indeed, Elsa is troubled, but not necessarily by the accusations of witchcraft that Ortrud made circulate, but by the need her innocence to be confirmed in the privacy of their marital relationship. She is afraid, secondly, that her partner

will suddenly disappear. However, are all these reasons sufficient to break the pact?

I claim, contrary to the most interpretations which state that Wagner's opera develops the symbolism of the binomial “virtues of the transcendent world – corruptibility and the fickleness of the terrestrial one”, that “Nie sollst du mich befragen!” is not a criterion to determine whether or not she is the feminine reflection of Lohengrin (in order to be possible their absolute union). On the contrary, the true moral imperative is the opposite: “Ask the question!” – “Do sollst befragen!”.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Immanuel Kant observes the existence of two types of moral principles: maxims and laws. The firsts derive, more or less visible, from the desire of a person for a certain determined result. For this reason, Kant says, they are contingents. The moral law, by contrast, is universal and does not depend on a specific content. The categorical imperative – “So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle of a universal legislation” (Kant 2002, 45) – excludes the particular desire of the person who formulates it.

The imperative enounced by Lohengrin is a maxim. Its purpose is determined and personal: to save their union, to validate their mutual trust, to fulfil the spiritual love and confirm her virtue. Yet, universal and historic value can be assigned only to its opposite – that which Elsa applies it, assuming herself all the risks. This fact becomes much clearer if we notice that the main conflict of Wagner's opera is, in fact, a dialectical-historical one (in the Hegelian sense), the romance between them being only the mechanism which produces the becoming of the world-spirit.

Wagner composes Lohengrin in a tense period of time in terms of politics, hoping to revive the dream of a unified Germany. Not accidentally the first scene depicts, with fast, Heinrich der Vogler, the founder of the medieval Germany, preparing to start a fight that brought together all the nobles and made them realize the importance of a strong state, able to protect its borders.

The initial conflict – of the political world of Brabant – constitutes the first moment of a dialectical triad. Both involved instances are contradictory. In Hegelian terms, the object does not correspond to its concept. Ortrud and Friedrich are a political entity which unifies the theoretical reason and the action, the praxis. Its essence is, however, its own self. They want to enjoy the benefits brought by the rank of Duke instead of ruling for the welfare of the others – as the concept of *leader* supposes.

The moral qualities and wishes of Elsa reflect it. For Hegel, however, in the absence of its real objectification, any concept remains only an abstract construct. Elsa does not possess the concrete possibilities of political action. Brooding spirit, lacking the necessary tools for undertaking concrete actions (political governance, participation in war alongside Heinrich), she reflects

the concept only *in itself* (as latency), not *for itself* (in the act). This second entity is, therefore, also contradictory.

Hegel describes, in the *Phenomenology of spirits*, at least two similar situations: at the transition towards the “*Unhappy consciousness*” and in the chapter entitled *The world of self-alienated Spirit*, in the context of the conflict between *faith* and *Enlightened reason*. In both (just as for Brabant), the options available in the real-historical world are contradictory. The so-called “unhappy conscience” is preceded by the unsuccessful experience of two attitudes – the stoicism and the scepticism – the only by which the servant – for it is about him in this fragment – could, at that moment, to know himself from its relationship with the physical world and thus to become free. As a result, it remains for him only the certainty of this failure and the formal thought (as a result of the scepticism) that he is trapped between something non-essential and something essential. Since it is his own failure, both his consciousness and the physical world are no-essential. Consequently, essential can be only the negative of both, something radically different of them. The solution, in other words, cannot come elsewhere than from outside, from the transcendent world.

This way consciousness meets, for the first time, something of a higher order than it. Its capability to understand the cult, religion is, however, an early and naïve one. Consciousness is not able to capture the Absolute in its truth: “For the Unhappy Consciousness the in-itself is the beyond of itself” (Hegel 2004, 139). In order to access it – consciousness thinks at this time – it “must liberate from itself”, deny itself. Another solution it cannot conceive for it is not yet aware of its unity with the Absolute (as will be after experiencing another several stages of its paideic journey), but only about the differences; hence her unhappiness.

The protagonist of the second fragment is consciousness became, meanwhile, spirit, *i.e.* knows it is a part of the historical world and that essentially depends on other self-consciousness. This time also, the available possibilities it has in order to raise itself, through education, above its natural state, are exhausted. State power and wealth, used separately or both assimilated by the “noble conscience” (or by the *ignoble*), the service brought to the leader or the advice, all proved to be contradictory. They do not guarantee the good, as it was initially assumed. When translated into the real world, they produce an opposite effect. For consciousness, it remains available only the “pure thought”, without any specific content, therefore, this time also, it must head towards the transcendent world. If compared to the first manifestations of the cult, *faith* – as it appears at this moment – is a superior form by which consciousness reports itself to the Absolute. But this time also, it is not sufficient for itself, for it is not revealed religion – as the spiritual consciousness will discover it in the last part of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. This actuality of the essence, Hegel explains, is not an

actuality of the real consciousness. "Although it is raised into the element of thought it does not yet count as a thought for this actual consciousness; rather it lies for the latter beyond its own actuality, for it is the flight from this actuality. Religion – for it is obviously religion that we are speaking about – in the form in which it appears here as the faith belonging to the world of culture, does not yet appear as it is in and for itself" (Hegel 2004, 322). Its shortcomings will come out soon, as a result of the confrontation with its negative, with the Enlightened pure insight.

The historical course of Brabant cannot be continued by the couple Ortrud-Friedrich or by Elsa, because both these options are contradictory. The salvation, therefore, should come from elsewhere: from the transcendent world of pure virtues of the Grail. The arrival of Lohengrin initiates, thus, the second moment of the dialectical triad. The couple Elsa-Lohengrin reflects the concept of leader *for-itself*. But, this time, it lacks its *in-itself*. Their union is impossible, self-contradictory. Both have rather the conscience of their difference. During the two days their terrestrial relationship lasts, Lohengrin realizes he is not fully aware of his mission: saviour? lover? leader of the army of Brabant in the battle? Only at the end he finds out that, for instance, the swan which brought him was actually Gottfried, Elsa's brother, turned into an animal by Ortrud. Elsa, in her turn, realizes she will never be able fully to understand her husband.

Semele gets pregnant and then gives birth to Dionysus. So happens with the princess from the Romanian fairytale about the pig. For Elsa, the wedding night, instead of being the moment of their union, is that of their irreconcilable separation. The sexual intercourse, assumed from the very beginning, does not happen.

In *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, Freud reports the case of a 30 years old woman suffering from severe obsessive behaviour (Freud 1920, 221-236). Several times a day, she runs into the room next to her bedroom, sits at the table, calls the maid, gives her various orders or, sometimes, fires her without reason. The cause of these obsessions, Freud explains, is her unsuccessful wedding night. Ten years ago, she married a much older man, who ran during the entire wedding night between the two chambers, trying unsuccessfully to get ready for the sexual intercourse. In the morning, for not to embarrass himself in front of the maid and of those who might have found out, he split red ink on the sheet. He failed this time also because he split it in another place than that in which was supposed to be the stain. Visiting the room, Freud observes a splash of red ink, this time, on the tablecloth. The place the young woman was sitting was specifically chosen so the maid, when entering the door, easily sees the splash. Thus, the obsessive gesture not only reproduces the traumatic scene but corrects it, in an attempt to save the husband.

The case of Elsa, if regarded through the prism of Freudian psychoanalysis, turns out to be even worse. The wedding night is not failed because of Lohengrin, a fact that might cause, in the future, a neurotic behaviour. The way Wagner builds this scene suggests, perhaps more than the composer himself thought, the impossibility of their union. The sexual intercourse is brutally interrupted. Friedrich rushes into their room and attacks Lohengrin. The last, trying to defend himself, kills him. Eros, the sexual instinct of life, is not blocked, as in the case of the young patient, but is replaced with *Todestrieb* – *the death drive*, the drive of self-destruction. *Trieb* and *Instinkt* oppose each other: when established, the death drive causes behaviours opposite to those dictated by the vital instincts. Freud observed this fact by treating soldiers returned from the front. This experience made him write the book *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*). *Todestrieb*, he explains, leads to repetition, not to an evolution. The soldiers suffered from recurrent dreams of the trauma, contrary to the expectancy of pleasure from the sleep. This drive made them repeat the traumatic experiences instead of reminding them as something belonging to the past.

Thus regarded, Elsa's trauma accentuates the contradiction. It is clear, from now on, that also this second dialectical moment must be denied. Yet, the *negation of the negation*, for Hegel, does not return us to the initial moment, repeating it, but generates a third one which resolves the first two. The historical-universal aim at which the couple Elsa-Lohengrin participates is the fight of Heinrich for the unification of the nation. When considered separately, the second moment – that of their amorous relationship – has its own goals and moral maxims. Yet, regarded from the viewpoint of the *world-spirit* (*i.e.* of universal history), it turns out to be a mere contradictory intermediary moment, which is required to be exceeded. Elsa has to choose between acting for a particular purpose or in favour of the universal law. She chooses, when she becomes aware of the impossibility of their union, the second one. "The forbidden question" must receive an answer, the terms of the contradiction must be acknowledged in their truth, even this will produce the denial of both of them.

"I will be the woman who, by her love, will save you", Senta says to the Captain of the Flying Dutchman, doomed to sail forever. And so it happens. Siegfried is saved by Brünnhilde, Elisabeth by Tannhäuser. The Pope does not forgive him for visiting the Mount Venus, the place of pleasure, despite his pilgrimage to Rome and his penitence. "You will be forgiven when my staff will blossom", the Pope says to him. Tannhäuser returns disappointed and finds out that Elisabeth died while praying for him. In the last scene of the opera, the pilgrims announce the miracle: on the Pope's staff sprouted new leaves. Elisabeth sacrificed herself, thus saving his soul.

Unconditional love and salvation coming from the part of that woman who embodies the ideal of *eternal feminine* (*das Ewig-weiblich*) is a recurrent theme in Wagner's operas. The composer himself sought, and seems he managed, in the end, to find that women able to save him and to bring peace to his soul, just as Gretchen, from the heaven, saved Faust ("Das Ewig – weiblich / zieht uns hinan" ("The Eternally Female draws us onward") – are the lyrics which end Goethe's *Faust II*).

By asking the "forbidden question" Elsa does not situate herself, as it may seem, outward the ideal of *Ewig-weiblich*. Yet, it is not Lohengrin who she saves, but the course of history. Her death – the last scene of the opera – is not a simple negation, is not a punishment, but produces a transformation. Elsa sacrifices herself, Lohengrin disappears, and history is continued by Gottfried, her brother brought back to human form. It is him, in fact, who reflects the concept of the leader of Brabant *in- and for-itself i.e.* a leader able to fight alongside Heinrich for the universal-historical purpose of unifying the nation.

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