

The Serpent Archetype in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

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Abstract:

The serpent serves as a prominent symbol in various mythologies and religious traditions, embodying a complex meanings that differ by culture. This article examines Friedrich Nietzsche's frequent and varied use of the serpent in his famous and influential book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In this text, the serpent emerges as a multifaceted symbol linked to themes of wisdom, materialism, instincts, mortality, transformation, renewal, and growth. Nietzsche's portrayal invites a reflection on the dual nature of the symbol, as it appears both as a loyal companion to Zarathustra, offering support, but also as a dangerous creature that thrusts him into extreme confrontations. Thus, the serpent encapsulates Nietzsche's thought and represents Nietzsche encouragement for his readers to recognize the bravery required to navigate the complexities of life, ultimately advocating for a philosophy that honors both our earthly connections and our capacity for spiritual evolution.

Keywords: Nietzsche; Zarathustra; Jung; Serpent; Snake; Symbolism; Nineteenth century philosophy

1) The serpent archetype

Serpents carry great symbolic significance in many cultures. In Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, they represent a variety of ideas—most prominently, perpetual metamorphosis and the fierce struggle for survival. After briefly reviewing the central role the motif plays in diverse religious and mythical contexts, I shall discuss how Nietzsche employs it.

Serpents feature in cultures the world over, many myths revolving around the early ambivalent attitude towards them—horror and abhorrence at their cunning and guile vs. admiration for their powers of rejuvenation and finesse. As a complex and cardinal multidimensional archetype, the snake represents a broad array of (on occasion contradictory) concepts that accord with divergent cultural and social norms. In many instances, the archetype serves a number of purposes within a single tradition or mythology, often being associated with varied themes—wisdom, enticement, evil, healing, renewal, etc.

Many societies regard serpents as smart, cunning, alluring, and deceptive—as in *Genesis*, wherein the snake tempts Eve into eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge (*Gen 3:4-7*). In Hebrew, שָׂרָפָה also functions as a verb, signifying divination—a roundly denounced practice (cf. *Deut 18:9-11*). In Zoroastrianism, the serpent is the symbol of Ahriman, the embodiment of evil (Lurker 1989, 5).

Apep, the Egyptian god of darkness and evil and Ra's adversary, similarly takes the form of a serpent (Bunson 2014, 44). While Christianity identifies the snake with Satan—the epitome of evil and deception—its intelligence can also be useful and valuable, Jesus encouraging his disciples to be “wise as serpents” (*Matt* 10:16).

Snakes are also associated with healing, both physical and mental. In accordance with God's command, Moses “made a copper serpent and mounted it on a standard; and when bitten by a serpent, anyone who looked at the copper serpent would recover” (*Num* 21:9). A snake entwines itself around the staff of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, as a symbol of cure and renewal (Rodríguez-Pérez 2020, 20). The Greek Messenger-god Hermes, who mediates between the realms of life and death, likewise carries a staff on which two coiled serpents face one another—an image likely reflecting the Egyptian fertility gods (Retief, 194-96).

The snake also functions as the god of healing in Gnosticism, Chinese myths similarly associating serpents with healing, safeguarding/protection, and sexuality and fertility (Retief & Cilliers 2006, 191). In Egyptian mythology, the goddess who protects the necropolis at Thebes takes the form of a snake (Lurker 1989, 124). Closely linked to the earth due to their ability to dig themselves thereinto, serpents further represent the wild, raw primal force (Rodríguez-Pérez 2020, 23). In Celtic and other sagas, they symbolize the netherworld and Earth-goddess, thus frequently being connected with fertility and rejuvenation. In the Gilgamesh Epic, the snake steals the secret of perpetual youth from the hero, its skin-shedding capacities lying behind the belief in its immortality (Retief & Cilliers 2006, 198; Lurker 1989, 370-71).

The ancient Greeks attributed diverse and conflicting symbolism to serpents. In addition to their ties with Asclepius and Hermes, snakes also appear in Tartarus—one of the divisions of the underworld in Greco-Roman mythology—as the indestructible offspring of Gaia, Mother-Earth. On occasion, they also serve as gatekeepers, Apollo fighting the python that dwells at the center of the earth and Hercules' Ladon, the guardian of the golden-apple-bearing tree, for example. At the same time, Athena's residence in Athens is guarded by a holy serpent in a rite that become so popular that the Greeks came to believe that, certain snakes protecting homes and hearths, they must not be harmed (Rodríguez-Pérez 2020, 6, 11-12, 14).

Hinduism esteems serpents as symbolizing both destruction/death and life/eternity. Closely linked with rack and ruin, the goddess Kali is always accompanied by snakes, for example. In other Eastern traditions, some texts depict the cobra-like supernatural Nagas as possessing the capacity to change their form. Serving as spiritual guardians of water and ancient wisdom, they represent wild creation on the one hand and maternalism (birth and suckling) on the other (Wessing 2006, 226; Heinze 2002, 41; Lurker 1989, 2-6, 10, 15).

In many mythologies and religious traditions, the snake is accorded metaphysical status, constituting a fundamental element of reality. The serpent plays a central role in the Fall of man in *Genesis*, Leviathan likewise serving as another embodiment of evil (cf. *Job* 3:8; 40:25-41:26, *Ps* 74:14;104:26; *Isa* 27:1). In Hinduism, the snake represents the cycle of creation and destruction,

being one of the manifestations of Vishnu. In Germanic folklore, a monstrous serpent, the offspring of Loki, embraces the globe, holding its tail in its mouth (Lurker 1989, 111, 125). Swallowing the Sun-god Ra nightly, the Egyptian mythological serpent Apep epitomizes chaos and darkness (Rodríguez-Pérez 2020, 5; Lurker 1989, 16; Bunson 2014, 44).

The snake appears in numerous, diverse, and antithetical guises in various traditions. Drawing heavily on disparate mythologies and religions, Jung attributes a wide-ranging symbolism to it, including transformation and rejuvenation, his system of archetypes—collective patterns embodying universal genetic behavioral traits that carry the form of mythological motifs—informing personality so that individuals inherit and reflect pre-existing templates whose conscious forms are merely secondary (Jung, 1957-1990, 9:1, 61). Jungian archetypes are thus common cultural themes representing the pan-human experience, shaping human life, dreams, and cultural symbols and influencing the way in which individuals experience and live in the world. As representational motifs, they resemble complex hereditary attributes—i.e. instincts and drives (Jung 2012, 67-69). They thus constitute a form of hidden wisdom human beings can locate within themselves that enables change, carrying the potential for spiritual growth by bearing the unconscious aspects of the soul (shadow, anima) and bringing them into consciousness (the ego) (Jung 2014, 41).

On various occasions, Jung adduces the serpent as a symbol of evil/the primal instincts. Maintaining that they are the anatomical representation of the sub-cortical structure of the cerebellum and spinal cord, they symbolize instinctive, unconscious mental aspects. He thus associates snake dreams as alluding to the tension between the emergence of a new non-instinctive consciousness and unconscious instincts (Jung, 1957-1990, 9:1, 99, 180)—also adducing cases in which, like the egg, serpents serve as a sheath for the true self or even an intellectual layer over the ego (9:1, 346). In this sense, they function as a symbol of unconscious energy, dealt with by transformative processes informed by the danger posed to personality on the one hand and its healing and enlargement on the other (Netzer 2023, 132-33).

Jung also appeals to the Kundalini—a form of mental energy likened to the serpent coiled around the spinal cord according to yogic thought. Human beings must arouse this energy by means of techniques that remove the snake from the spinal cord through the skull, thereby opening up tracks for mental instinctualism. According to Jung, the Kundalini corresponds to the anima—the feminine archetypal aspect that forms an impersonal element of personality, whose very raising makes a person aware of his or her instinctive nature. Fully uniting all the parts of the personality, this process is essentially transformative (Jung 2012b, 22, 39, 68).

2) The serpent archetype in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Nietzsche depicts a world that is continually forming, painting time as an eternal return—an endless cyclical recoil *from the terror* of construction and destruction, the simple to the complex and back, governed by no purpose (*WP* §1067). As Zarathustra contends: “All truth is crooked, time itself is a circle ... Must not whatever *can* happen, already have happened, been done, passed by before?” (II, “On the Vision and the Riddle,” 2).

Nietzsche regards the will to grow and expand as lying at the heart of all human life, referring to it as the will to power. Every living thing is thus innately an egotist, his or her primary goal being self-enlargement and dominance rather than survival (*GS* §349). The *übermensch* embodies the authentic expression of this will and affirmation (that exists despite the sense of purposelessness) and embrace of individual fate (*WP* §866, 1041): “My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity” (*EH* §10 from “Why Am I So Clever”).

Regarded as Nietzsche’s most personal and poetic text, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is closely associated with his inner self-searching, the ideas it contains taking the form of narrative, myths, and archetypes rather than philosophical doctrine. Many consider it to be less representative than his other works precisely due to its poetic surrealism. Others argue that it is the fullest expression of his thoughts, the figure of Zarathustra embodying diverse forces (Huenemann 2013, 75).

Nietzsche cautions against abandoning all mythological tradition. Comparing those who live without myth as starving for food, he argues that popular mythology acts as a common-memory-and-meaning-based narrative that, incorporating strong emotions, makes sense of the world and time for individuals and collectives alike. He thus distinguishes between peoples on the basis of the mythologies they embrace, whereby they encounter the terror of the world. As lovers of myths that find expression in tragedy, the Greeks cultivate the virtues, for example (*TI* §23 from “What I Owe the Ancients”).

In this sense, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* serves as a new myth, uniting his thought processes into a worldview governed by the human will for power and the eternal return, training people in the values that produce the *übermensch*. It thus recalls his perception of the godhead as a useful falsehood (pragmatism being more important than truth): while artificial, it is vital for survival in a chaotic universe (Winchester 1994, 108-11, 121).

The serpent archetype occurs in various guises in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche identifying diverse manifestations of it that embody disparate concepts. On numerous occasions, the snake appears as Zarathustra’s wise companion and advisor. On others, it assumes the form of a viper whose venomous bite both kills and brings to life. When black, it represents gloomiest thought; when green, it is a heavy creature that, unable to shed its skin and change, must simply wait for death.

The archetype of the snake in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* thus represents three things: a) wisdom (of the body/land) and deep creative sagacity; b) instinctualism, humiliation, and struggle; and c) transformation, metamorphosis, cyclicity, and victory.

3) The serpent as symbolizing wisdom

The snake symbolizes first and foremost wisdom. It makes an appearance as early as the prologue, wherein Zarathustra leaves his isolated abode in the mountains to share his wisdom. He is accompanied by his companions the eagle and serpent, the former also symbolizing the desire for elevation in many ancient myths. The snake, in contrast, embodies the desire for descent/the depths.

In the prologue, Zarathustra depicts it as the wisest of all creatures whose customary pose is coiled around the eagle's neck:

Thus Zarathustra had spoken to his heart when the sun stood at noon, then he gazed at the sky with a questioning look, for above him he heard the sharp cry of a bird. And behold! An eagle cut broad circles through the air, and upon it hung a snake, not as prey but as a friend, for the snake curled itself around the eagle's neck. "It is my animals!" said Zarathustra, and his heart was delighted. "The proudest animal under the sun and the wisest animal under the sun – they have gone forth to scout. (I, "Zarathustra's Prologue," 10)

Discussing the symbolism of Zarathustra's faunal companions, Heidegger depicts the eagle as a proud bird that inhabits the heights, the wise and ductile snake being the master of disguise. He thus interprets their joint appearance as alluding to the motif of the eternal return (Heidegger 1984, 2:47; Heidegger & Magnus 1967, 413-14). Jung treats them rather differently, regarding the eagle as epitomizing intuition and spirit and the serpent corporality, sexuality, and vitality. The two are thus polar opposites, the eagle carrying the snake on its wings thereby representing the victory of the spirit over the flesh (Jung 1988, 18-19, 22).

The antithetical representation of snakes as both wise and cunning is framed within Nietzsche's privileging of instinct over reason. Regarding the latter as merely a corporal phenomenon, he concludes that the body and its direct contact with the world must be granted precedence in establishing meaning (*BGE* §230; *WP* §489). *Contra* the central stream of Western thought, he opposes the idea that reason plays a central role in the recognition of the world and humanity. Zarathustra refers to corporal wisdom as "great reason," contrasting with intellectual wisdom—wisdom in its conventional sense—being "small reason," the tool of great reason (I, "On the Despisers of the Body"). While Freud considers the primal processes, which closely resemble simple instinctualism, as inferior and primitive in relation to secondary, more complex processes, Nietzsche accords them a higher status à la Jung et al. According to this view, primal, the complex products of consciousness are the result of unconscious processes—as evinced in creativity and dreams (Noy 2008, 55-56, 133, 169).

While wishing to be wise like the serpent, Zarathustra knows that this status lies beyond him. He thus tempers his request: "May I be wiser! May I be wise from the ground up like my snake! But I ask the impossible, and so I ask instead of my pride that it always walk with my wisdom!" (I, "Zarathustra's Prologue," 10). As innate representations of his inner life, the faunal pairing that accompanies him throughout his journeying stands for the harmony between body and spirit that, despite their polarity, must become integrated. Rather than limiting they must strengthen one another, those who flee to upper realms thus being as flawed as those who immerse themselves in the earthly.

Other occurrences of the snake as symbolizing wisdom are secondary. In the second part of the novel, Zarathustra's animals again represent his metamorphosis. Here, the serpent is the manifestation of wisdom and self-knowledge (II, "The Child with the Mirror"). The fourth section

contains several references. “The Magician” depicts the snake (and eagle) as an advisor who helps the wizard find the inner power to shape himself and transcend his limitations on his way to becoming his true self (IV 2). The snake plays a similar role in “The Voluntary Beggar,” wherein Zarathustra sends the mendicant to consult the eagle and serpent in addition to the cows to whom he pays heed (IV). Later on, the snake reappears on the periphery as a symbol of wisdom and the courage to change (IV, “On Science”). Finally, it enters the stage as Zarathustra’s companion, echoing his concluding speech and epitomizing wisdom and the conditions for self-improvement (IV, “The Sleepwalker Song,” 2).

4) The serpent as symbolizing human drives

The snake also frequently represents instinctualism and inferiority. In the first part of the novel, the pale criminal’s inner world is depicted as a “ball of wild snakes that seldom have peace from each other – so they go forth for themselves and seek prey in the world” (I, “On the Pale Criminal”). It thus stands for the id—the wild, unregulated primal drive, inner life being a system of conflicting drives that interfere with a person’s ability to mobilize targeted forces.

This view is a product of Nietzsche’s philosophy, according to which human instincts form the basis for understanding the subject, driving individuals to act and interpret reality in diverse ways—each governed by the desire to control the whole organism and impose its perspective on the others. The subject being none other than a verbal fiction that clothes the drives that take turns controlling the self, Nietzsche calls on individuals to cultivate a supremely pragmatic inner life in order to unite all their drives into their service. He thus distinguishes between a state in which one instinct dominates, seeking to synchronize all the others to produce harmony, and one in which they all act as friendly rivals, creating a weak personality (*BGE* §6; *WP* §68). Modern scholars thus tend to understand Nietzschean authentic selfhood as an orderly, organized structure of drives lacking any moral focus—i.e. a strong will that enables discipline and control over the diverse instinctive forms (Gemes & Janaway 2006, 336).

Later on, Zarathustra likens the snake to the evil and negative aspects of human beings, attributing a measure of positivity to evil, however, as the locus of exoticism and power that enables creation and change: “I am enchanted to see the wonders hatched by a hot sun: tigers and palm trees and rattle snakes” (II, “On Human Prudence”); “When swords ran every which way like red-stained snakes, our fathers warmed to life; the sun of all peace seemed limp and lackluster to them, but the long peace caused them shame” (IV, “Conversation with the Kings,” 2). In the latter chapter, the blood-stained sword-like snake symbolizes drive, ambition, and war-lust, being linked to Nietzsche’s view of warfare as necessary for greatness and power. Power drives rest on an inner instinctual struggle, Nietzsche arguing already in the prologue that “one must still have chaos in oneself in order to give birth to a dancing star” (5). Human beings must fight to channel and harness their instincts in the service of growth and creativity in order to bring about change both in themselves and in the world.

In this context, the serpent is also an inferior, abhorrent creature. In the second part of the novel, it represents the hypocrisy of those who despise the earthly (II, “On Immaculate Perception”).

This symbolism recurs in the third part, wherein Nietzsche juxtaposes the snake with the pig: “Lust to rule: before whose gaze human beings crawl and cower and drudge and become lower than snake and swine” (III, “On the Three Evils,” 2). Here, the serpent is thus emblematic of the instincts, bareness, and the subjection of principles to its desire for control.

According to Zarathustra, despite the human tendency to avoid the base qualities of human nature, they must be dealt with in order to overcome and gain self-control. When drives are acknowledged, they can be transcended and harnessed in the desired direction. Nietzsche thus portrays the powerful as first and foremost faithful to their instinctual capacities, which cannot be brought into line with social ethics. Human beings needing to free themselves from conventional morality in the name of growth, he contends that the noblest person is also the most wicked.¹ As Zarathustra observes: “But it is with human beings as it is with this tree ... The more they aspire to the heights and the light, the more strongly their roots strive earthward, downward, into darkness, depths – into evil” (I, “On the Tree on the Mountain”).

In the fourth part, Nietzsche expresses his yearning for and closeness to the eagle and snake, laying emphasis here on the serpent’s naturalness and simplicity (IV, “The Song of Melancholy,” 1). The animals that wished for his recovery in the third section now advise him to go and learn how to sing from the birds (III, “The Convalescent,” 2). The dark aspects of simple naturalness are linked to growth, overcoming, and the return to the abyss on the way to authenticity, Nietzsche more than once depicting the *übermensch* as Dionysus or a child who naturally conveys his desire for power—transmigrating out of himself in innocence and confirmation of the existing—as an act of spontaneous intensification (I, “On the Three Metamorphoses”).

5) The serpent as a symbol of transformation

The snake also stands for change and self-overcoming—circularity. In the prologue, it appears on the stage immediately before Zarathustra’s metamorphosis. Here, it may well represent the process of change via the shedding of its skin and the leaving behind/ transcendence of its old ways of thinking. This idea occurs in the earlier *Daybreak*, wherein Nietzsche notes: “The snake that cannot slough its skin perishes” (§573). Casting off the old is a prerequisite for elevation.

In “The Ugliest Human Being,” the serpent epitomizes the ugly person himself. In his account of “Snake Death” valley, Zarathustra depicts the “species of hideous, thick, green snakes that would come here to die when they grew old” (4). As remarked above, Nietzsche regards serpents incapable of shedding their skin as condemned to death. The ugliest human being thus symbolizes the person who, having killed God, fails to re-assess his or her values. Not being able to change, he or she chooses to reject renewal.

In the first part of the novel, the viper represents another essential serpentine attribute:

One day Zarathustra had fallen asleep beneath a fig tree, since it was hot, and he had laid his arm over his face. Then an adder came along and bit him in the neck, so that Zarathustra cried out in pain. When he had taken his arm from his face he looked at the snake; it recognized the eyes of Zarathustra, turned

around awkwardly and tried to get away. "Not so fast," spoke Zarathustra. "You have not yet accepted my thanks! You waked me in time, my way is still long." "Your way is still short," said the adder sadly: "My poison kills." Zarathustra smiled. "Since when did a dragon ever die of snake poison?" he said. "But take back your poison! You are not rich enough to give it to me." Then the snake fell upon his neck once again and licked his wound. (I, "On the Adder's Bite")

While the snake serves as a lethal threat, Zarathustra knows how to use its poison as an antidote for self-growth. According with his famous dictum: "What does not kill me makes me stronger" (*TI* §8 from "Arrows and Epigrams"), this view leads in turn to the notions of self-transcendence and the *übermensch*. Zarathustra thanks the snake for awaking him, this imagery also serving as a metaphor for waking up to the truth and changing the existing order. Although this entails great suffering, it is welcome, Zarathustra blessing the serpent for his toxic gift.

When his disciples ask him the moral of this story, he replies: "The annihilator of morals the good and just call me: my story is immoral" (I, "On the Adder's Bite"). If Judeo-Christian ethics are good and proper, the poisonous snake is he who seeks to destroy them. These ethics being in fact a sign of weakness and degeneration, however, the toxin also plays a positive role, awakening human beings to a truer lifeform.

As noted above, Nietzsche emphasizes the fact that human beings must kill God and create a new myth. This imperative is intensified in light of the human need to change and the way in which people observe and shape the reality in which they live. Constituting the preeminent symbol of rebellion against God in Western thought, the snake epitomizes the existential choice between values, rebellion against existing norms, and an attempt to fashion a distinctive perspective in the absence of absolute values.

In the Hebrew Bible, the serpent symbolizes rebellion against divine authority. Seeking to allay Eve's unease over eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the snake tells her: "You will be like God, who knows good and bad" (Gen 3:5). Human beings cannot rise to a higher order if they are conformists. They must rebel and challenge authority as Freudian Oedipal murderers, the *übermensch* revolting against weak servant ethics and the limits of morality and becoming like God, knowing good and evil in the framework of individuation, independence, and authenticity.

The lesson for humanity is the demand for the creation of a new myth that will encapsulate the human worldview and human beings' place in society, elucidating the values that must be sanctified in order to make sense of life. This new myth is exemplified in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the symbols/archetypes therein not only drawing on early mythical sources but also seeking new forms and thereby serving as a modern alternative.

The snake makes a significant appearance in "The Other Dance Song" in the third part of the novel, taking the form of a woman and the very soul of life in a passage that recalls the Greek Medusa:

I leaped over to you; you dodged my advance, retreating deftly; and only the licking, fleeing, trailing tongues of your hair were left me! I leaped away from your hair's lurid snaking; and there you stood,

half facing me, your eyes afire with aching. ... Oh this cursed clever, supple snake and slippery witch!
Gone without a trace? (3, 1)

Zarathustra describes life as a dance with a female snake. Despite finding it difficult to decide whether he is the hunter or hunted, he chooses not to be the sacrifice, waltzing the serpent to the tune of his whip. This snake can be interpreted as a metaphor for Nietzsche's call to approach life with power, joy, and celebration rather than fear or terror. Zarathustra thus teaches the need for courage and contentment in the present in the face of the chicanery of life in order to enable future elevation and growth.

According to Nietzsche, human beings must seek to transcend all contact with the external and internal worlds. Despite appearing to oppose reason, Nietzsche in fact attributes an important role to it in the organization of the inner world, its overcoming leading to the reconciliation of conflicts and clashes in the soul by means of stimulation into life and the cultivation and conquering of passions (*BGE* §200). Human beings should thus gain benefit from everything they encounter on the grounds that choice strengthens, weeding out everything that weakens the will. Reason's role is to outline a way of dealing effectively with human drives—namely, by interpreting reality and gradually but persistently assimilating new habits until they become internalized and second nature.

The snake-woman illustrates an important and integral element of the process of becoming stronger—namely, the notion of the eternal return. As in other mythologies, the serpent assumes a metaphysical status here, lying at the heart of reality itself—whether in the form of the eternal return upon which Nietzschean existence rests or as the female dimension (à la Daoist yin) of reality. Significantly, as we have seen Jung also identifies the Kundalini with the anima as the female archetype in the male personality.

Jung—and even more prominently Erich Neumann in his footsteps—adduces the link between the serpent and the negative archetype of the engulfing Great Mother. The snake tempts human beings to return to the unknown, to flood their inner world with the unconscious—i.e. make direct contact with their shadow—which, while enabling a new awareness, also threatens to become overwhelming. The mythical hero who defeats the dragon and is not devoured by it in fact confronts his dark shadow, conquering what threatens him from within (Netzer 2023, 135-36, 140, 142).

In the third part of the novel, the snake is directly and horrifically associated with the eternal return:

And truly, I saw something the like of which I had never seen before. A young shepherd I saw; writhing, choking, twitching, his face distorted, with a thick black snake hanging from his mouth. Had I ever seen so much nausea and pale dread in one face? Surely he must have fallen asleep? Then the snake crawled into his throat – where it bit down firmly. My hand tore at the snake and tore – in vain! It could not tear the snake from his throat. Then it cried out of me: “Bite down! Bite down! Bite off the head! Bite down!” – Thus it cried out of me, my dread, my hatred, my nausea, my pity, all my good and bad cried out of me with one shout. ... Meanwhile the shepherd bit down as my shout advised him; he bit with a good bite! Far away he

spat the head of the snake – and he leaped to his feet. No longer shepherd, no longer human – a transformed, illuminated, *laughing* being! Never yet on earth had I heard a human being laugh as *he* laughed! (III, “On the Vision and the Riddle” 2)

Nietzsche often depicts the eternal return as a heavy, threatening idea according to which meaningless and purposeless existence endlessly spins around on itself (*GS* §341). This circularity constitutes one of its central features—the snake biting its own tail (IV, “The Sleepwalker Song,” 11). Or Zarathustra observes, everything doubles back on itself as a wheel forever spinning, everything dying and coming alive again (cf. *Qoh* 1:9).

The eternal return is also rejuvenating and empowering, however. In *Zarathustra*, this notion finds expression in the call to the young shepherd to bite the snake—i.e. for a bold, barbaric struggle against the gravity of the harshest idea of all. After the shepherd fights back and defeats the snake (as primal thought), he is thus enlightened and encouraged. Rather than surrendering to the horror the eternal return embodies or despairing before it, individual should esteem it as an absolute value (III, “The Convalescent,” 2). Calling out to it in celebration as coming to terms with his fate, Zarathustra thus declares his love and affection for it, consecrating it with a bridal ring (III, “The Seven Seals,” 1). In this sense, the eternal return serves as a psychological test: the more gravity governs a person, the harder and more intolerable the eternal return seems. When someone is filled with lightness and cheerfulness, however, thinking of it has a liberating effect that drives he or she upwards (Oger 1997, 4-7, 10-13).

The serpent that enters the shepherd’s mouth and closes the circle exemplifies the way in which human beings form part of the pattern of eternal return. This active move of biting the snake to death alludes to the fact that even if human beings accept their place within the eternal return they retain an element of free will/choice—and thus the potential to change the future. The bite may also represent an act of self-preservation and authenticity in the face of the world’s attempt to engulf human beings and fashion them according to its own design. Jung reads the shepherd as becoming superhuman after biting the snake’s head—on a par with the apotheosis that occurs in several Egyptian myths in which the serpent represents the godhead or a demonic power human beings must overcome (Domenici 2018, 9).

In “The Convalescent,” Nietzsche directly relates to the chapter discussed above. Alongside the reference to the deadly black snake, he here adduces the serpent aids Zarathustra as he recovers. Zarathustra recognizes that the shepherd into whose mouth the serpent coils itself is in fact himself: “... and how that monster crawled into my throat and choked me! But I bit off its head and spat it away from me” (III, 2). Zarathustra’s struggle with the snake is thus also associated with self-consciousness, the serpent being depicted as darkest thought and the biting off and spitting out of its head serving as an analogy of himself and his salvation. The black serpent is further compared in this chapter to the disgust of the little man who endlessly returns to himself. This may be understood as a warning to those who repeat the same action to contract their attributes and take no active steps to alter their state.

As we observed above, Heidegger also highlights the affinities between Zarathustra’s faunal

companions and circularity. Confirming his nature to him, the animals inform him that his destiny is to instruct human beings regarding the eternal return: “For your animals know well, oh Zarathustra, who you are and must become; behold, *you are the teacher of the eternal recurrence* – that now is *your* destiny!” (III, 2). He thus maintains that the faunal pair is responsible for teaching Zarathustra the form into which he must metamorphosize, representing the blending of pride and wisdom to which he must aspire (Heidegger & Magnus 1967, 413-14, 429).

Like other Nietzschean scholars, Heidegger regards the eternal return, love of destiny, and *übermensch* as forming integral parts of a single concept, human beings saving their will by constantly affirming the narrative of empower they choose, thereby determining their fate, past, and life as a whole (Loeb 2001, 29-30, 33-34, 38-41). In this context, Nietzsche’s recall of Heraclitus’ account of the world as in a process of continual change is of note. Building on his idea that reality is governed by fire, Nietzsche adduces Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility, whose rites called for the celebration of volatility (*TI* §4 from “What I Owe the Ancients”).

Like Dionysus, the Jungian serpentine archetype also contains an element of trickery that is linked to the shadow—i.e. everything rejected and abhorred in society, such as the instincts and immoral behavior (Netzer 2023, 137). Hereby, Zarathustra contends that only a dancing god can be believed in, thus calling for the slaying of Satan through laughter—i.e. the most primal thought. He then proceeds to describe the lightness of being that falls upon him: “Now I am light, now I fly, now I see myself beneath me, now a god dances through me” (I, “On Reading and Writing”).

This view aligns with Nietzsche’s attempts to undermine the traditional Christian theological doctrine that God’s primary attribute is absolute goodness. Asserting that such a belief not only restricts but also distorts the godhead’s true nature, he argues for a far more complex and multidimensional deity—one who can dance and sin. He thus appeals to the Greek gods who celebrated their affirmation and nature (*WP* §1052). The serpent’s positive and negative aspects and transformative skills (shedding its skin) evince its ability to change (which human beings should aspire to imitate) and move between good and evil in accordance with its needs—irrespective of any moral compass.

At the end of the first part of the novel, Zarathustra’s disciples present him with “a staff upon whose golden knob a snake encircled the sun” (I, “On the Bestowing Virtue,” 1). The master interprets the sun as symbolizing ruling, dominant thought as the supreme good— girdled by the knowing snake to indicate the combination of will and knowledge. This representation relates to the eternal return— here as a volitional psychological conflict rather than metaphysical dictum, however. The serpent embodies the process of self-overcoming that, through training, enables the individual to transcend the dark drives of human nature on the way to a deeper understanding and a new, higher nature on the one hand and the fact that self-elevation is not achieved all at once but is a lengthy, Sisyphean process on the other.

According to Jung, Nietzsche turns the traditional symbolism on its head. While the snake/dragon customarily devours the classical hero, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* the serpent is (partially) ingested by the shepherd. As we saw above, Jung regards the snake as representative of the denied aspects of human nature, whose integration is necessary in order to reconcile antithetical elements and achieve

individuation. He thus views Nietzsche as shedding established values but refusing to accept his dark side, which remains unconscious—i.e. avoids incorporating the anima within his personality. This state reflects his mental breakdown (Domenici 2018, 6-8, 21-23).

The shepherd into whose mouth the snake enters and is bitten to death epitomizes the transcendence that enables the emergence of the Nietzschean *übermensch*/Jungian harmony (Domenici 2018, 21). As Bishop (1995, 8-9, 117) observes, the Jungian process of individuation parallels Zarathustra's "becoming who you are"—i.e. the actualization of the *übermensch* ideal is synonymous with Jung's identification of the "I" with the archetype of the self. This process entails a continuous struggle with the unconscious along the route to the expansion and perfection of personality.

The serpent forms part of the Jungian shadow archetype—the unconscious parts of the human psyche that are too dark to be acknowledged. While it possibly even serves as its mythical manifestation, it is not an exclusively negative component, also creating the psychic energy that enables psychic content to be transferred from the dark to the light. It thus forms the basis of rebellion, the perpetual need for transformation, non-acceptance and irreconciliation with what exists, and the will for renewal and rebirth.

Despite the risks to Nietzsche's mental health, he calls for the bold choice of self-transcendence. The Nietzschean world operates in accordance with fixed principles (eternal return, predetermined fate) that threaten to subsume human beings, annul their value, and enslave them. They must thus seek to overcome these—as represented by the serpent—and reach a state in which they devour rather than being devoured. By taking this courageous path, they can turn the toxin within themselves into good, their transformative value giving them the power, alongside their circularity, to change and grow into something different.

Conclusion

Nietzsche's thought is characterized by inconsistency and contradiction, some parts being framed in rational analytical philosophical terms and others in poetic, symbolic, and prophetic style. The latter is preeminently on display in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, readers often seeking an Ariadnean thread in order to make their way through the maze. The serpent archetype functions as one of the most powerful symbols in the novel, the many and varied guises it takes being analyzed and discussed in detail above.

The motif of the snake in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* ties together many of the major themes of Nietzsche's philosophy—eternal return, change and self-transcendence, love of struggle, healthy drives, the harnessing of the instincts for growth and creativity, etc. Epitomizing both cunning and the wisdom of earthly life, the serpent represents inferiority and abjection, the evil inclination and humiliation, temptation and instinct—and the female element, the soul of life, the depths of the psyche and the unconscious, the conflicting drives and the danger of death.

On the other side, it symbolizes renewal and the removal of the old and undesirable, its poison serving as a life- and reality-affirming antidote—the eternal return or Ouroboros, the snake that bites its tail. Although human beings may come to disregard their old values, in "biting back" they can

resist everything life forces them to swallow, transcend their circumstances, and rise above what they were, accepting the inevitable with joy and life- celebration.

I suggest that the central feature of the serpent archetype and Nietzsche's innovative use of it lies in the idea of transformation—specifically, that of human attitudes towards the world. Nietzsche's dark and merciless universe reflects his broader concepts of fate and the eternal return. If we translate the latter into terms of human relations with the world, Nietzsche makes a dichotomous distinction between being engulfed by the exterior and engorging it and passing to the other side of this process (death, insanity) to a new, higher life—this transformative essence resting on swallowing its toxin and surviving.

Most human beings being subsumed by/within the world, predetermined fate and the eternal return govern human life and reduce human stature. While no one can escape either, everyone can adopt, develop, and embrace his or fate, undergoing a comprehensive inner transformation of life containment and fate as a dance, elevation, change, and growth that in effect is re-formation as an *übermensch*. In this sense, the serpent archetype serves Nietzsche as an Ariadnean thread that leads people out of the Nietzschean maze of ideas, both as an accompanying force and as an advisor serving as a natural instinct that rises above rationality as a symbol both of the dangers that lurk ahead of human beings as they make their way towards transformation and the choice between engulfment and ingestion.

The modern myth Nietzsche develops in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* seeks to guide human beings towards observing life through the prism of the will to power, the eternal return, and the choice of self-transcendence. As a multifaceted symbol incorporating conflicting elements, it is primarily associated with the power of change and renewal, serving as a central means for guiding people towards the cultivation of human attributes and attainment of the status of *übermensch*.

Human beings are born and live under the inescapable sentence of death, the ways of struggling and rebelling against their fate being the active embrace of the curse of destiny and dancing through life—biting the snake and swallowing rather than being swallowed. While the poison is lethal, it can also serve as an antidote and enable a fuller, higher life. The Nietzschean serpent archetype thus constitutes the perfect symbol of this cruel choice.

Endnotes:

1. Nietzsche betrays the influence of Schelling here, who identifies selfish evil as a vital element of nature (rather than the absence of good) that helps sharpen life forces. Human beings gain their freedom through manifesting their evilness, demonstrating themselves as capable of subjecting the general to the individual will. These ideas paved the way for Nietzsche to undermine the conventional notion of good and transcend morality: see Bowie, 2023.

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