SYMBOLISM OF THE SERPENT IN KLIMT'S DRAWINGS

Antonela Corban, PhD. "Al. I. Cuza" University of Iaşi and University of Burgundy, Dijon

Abstract. The theme of the serpent repeats and undergoes constant reinterpretation in many of Klimt's paintings, the author often considering the significance conferred to it by tradition, yet adding personal elements as well in its pictorial approach. The purpose of this article is to indicate and analyze the very paintings in which Klimt treats the theme of the snake from the perspective of its potential significations.
To start with, we shall focus on the analysis of the signification of the snake/ serpent symbol in various cultural and religious areas and we shall insist on the ambivalent character of this symbol (the serpent could be associated with both life and death, being a creature that triggers both fear and fascination). Out of the many interpretations associated with the symbolic myth of the serpent, we shall choose only those related to Klimt's work, noticing that the artist copes, each and every time, with a different signification of it.
A first meaning the painter considers is that of creative wisdom, based on intelligence, knowledge and power – Asclepius's serpent (in Medicine *and Hygeia) or Athens' serpent (*Pallas Athene*). On the other hand, it may represent the poisonous intelligence associated with cunning and envy, as in* Jurisprudence, *in* Envy *or his late, unfinished work,* Adam and Eve. *It could be about the complex embodiment of natural forces (benevolent, as the dragon from* Tragedy, *or hostile, as the Echidna – like monster, together with Typhon, the winged one, in* Beethoven Frieze*). Klimt identifies the meaning of a phallic symbol in* Nuda Veritas *and* Water Serpents, *a symbol associated with life, in the shape of the serpent twisted around Hygeea's arm in* Medicine, *or with death, embodied in the black snakes from* Procession of the Dead.

Keywords. Symbol, myth, hypostases and representations of the serpent/ snake.

The word "serpent" is related to the Latin word *serpens/ ntis*, as the verb *serpō/ ere* means "to crawl" ("The snake (*serpens*) takes its name because it creeps (*serpere*) by secret approaches; it crawls not with open steps but by tiny thrusts of its scales[1]). The same creature is named in English by the noun "snake"; although the two words are often used as synonyms, a difference between them exists. "Snake" usually indicates a member of the reptiles family and is preferred in the scientific jargon, while "serpent" carries also symbolic connotations, as it is used in religious, mythical, literary or artistic contexts.

In most religious and cultural areas, the serpent plays a fundamental symbolic role. It has a wide range of attributes, some of them contradictory, which indicates the complexity of this symbol as well as its underlying ambiguity. For this reason, tradition equally associates it with a negative role, as it is capable of causing death through its mortal venomous bite and a positive one on account of its relation to the earth and its energies. It can have an apotropaic function, but it can equally be man's foe.

On one hand, it is a chthonian creature, a keeper of the boundaries of the underworld and of the realm of the dead; on the other hand, it can be related to the sun's rays (as it is in the Egyptian tradition). The fact that it transcends its chthonian status is symbolically rendered by the two intertwining serpents on Hermes' winged caduceus: "the lower

[1]*Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, translated by St.A.Barney, W.J.Lewis, J.A.Beach, Oliver Berghof, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 255

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transcendence from underworld snake – consciousness, passing through the medium of earthly reality, finally attains transcendence to transpersonal reality on its winged flight"[2]. This image is also reminiscent of Kundalini, the vital force in Oriental tradition, which can be awakened through meditation.

The serpent can be seen as both a male sexual symbol due to its phallic shape and a female sexual symbol owing to its capacious belly and the sinuous lines. It is Eve's great tempter and, at the same time, a symbol of wisdom (Matthew 10:16, "Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves") and of the revelation of hidden meanings. Because of its poison and of the unexpected manner in which it surfaces, the serpent is a source of fright, a symbol of unconscious fears.

Its physical features (sly and slippery, cold, with hypnotizing eyes) transferred to the moral plane have resulted in a large number of idioms and proverbs: "To take a snake to one's bosom", "It is good to strike the serpent's head with your enemy's hand", "He that hath been bitten by a serpent is afraid of a rope", "The whisperer's tongue is worse than serpent's venom".

The great spiritual and religious traditions place it together with the most important deities and remarkable mythological characters, both male and female, both negative and positive; some serpents thus become their emblem or become gods themselves (for example the serpent Uraues of Ancient Egypt, the pre-Columbian Quetzalcoatl, the serpent Python killed by Apollo, the snakes in the hands of the Mykonos priestess-goddess, Athena's serpent, Hygeea's, the oriental Nagas serpents, the serpent wreathing around the tree of life in Paradise, Moses' brazen serpent, the exaggerated forms of the serpent in the shapes of the oriental dragon, the dragon that St. George defeats or of the Basilisk).

1. Klimt. The serpent and the time

In the drawing *Januar*, published in the journal *Ver Sacrum* (associated to the Viennese Sezession), the serpent is associated to time. There are in fact four symbolical elements whose significance is conducive to the idea of time and its passage. Firstly, Time is allegorically represented as a bearded winged old man, with a furrowed brow, holding an hourglass. This piece is reminscent of ancient emblems and is well established that Klimt had an interest in this topic. The representation of themes and ideas through emblems and allegories are modes he used in several of his paintings. For example, in 1882 Klimt completes a set of pictures which the editor Martin Gerlach included in his *Allegorien und Emblemen* (a portfolio of models). Returning to the representation of winged bearded Old Father Time, an interesting emblem related to the topic is *Quinti horati flacci emblemata* (1607) by Otto van Veen, Rubens' master.

Time is associated to another image representing revival – that of the Ouroboros serpent. The manner in which the latter is represented is reminscent of emblems, among which those by Alciato can be mentioned here. In various cultural and geographical areas, the myths related to Ouroboros have various meanings. Ouroboros, the snake biting its tail, is a symbol which, through its circular shape, is an image of the eternal return. Any ending is thus

[2] Jung, Carl Gustav, *Man and His Symbols*, Dell Publishing, New York, 1968, p. 155

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followed by a new beginning in a perpetual repetition[3]. In biting its own tail, the serpent signifies an evolutionary cycle closed in itself. According to certain interpretations, the circular shape is associated to two opposing principles: the union between the chtonic world represented by the serpent, and the celestial world represented by the circle[4]. However, the snake biting its tail is in fact rotating, it is closed inside its own cycle, thus being suggestive of the wheel of existences. Since it seems doomed to be forever captive in its own cycle, ascension to a higher level is therefore impossible, it only symbolizes the eternal return, the neverending circle of rebirth, the endless reiteration indicative of a fundamental instinct for death[5].

The serpent biting its tail – a symbol that was adopted by the gnostics – signifies both eternity and the circle of life and the zodiac, as well as the union of the sexes (through its tail which is held in its mouth). Among others, they considered the serpent to be the deep dark unfathomable side of divinity.

This particular aspect of the cyclical passage of time is captured by Klimt. In his drawing, on the snake's body, close to its head, there is nude maiden standing upright in front of Time. His eyes are closed, as he does not allow himself to be impressed by her beauty and youth. He seems to point at the elderly woman crouching on the snake's tail, chin propped in hand: old, withered, helpless. This is the course that no creature can elude. Since it has no intention of concealing anything, Time is also presented as a nude. The passage of time and its devastating and overwhelming effects on the physical body presented by using distinct human characters at different ages is a recurrent theme with Klimt at various stages in his career: *The Three Ages of Woman* (1905), *Love*, *Medicine* (1907), *Hope I* (1903), *Death and Life* (1916).

Another element that can be identified in Klimt's drawing is the hourglass, an atribute of God Chronos; it can be construed as a symbol of transience, of vanity of vanities, of the passage of time, of death itself. It is an instrument that has to be reverted continuously in order to work. Is is therefore associated in its turn to cyclical time in the cosmogonic design, to eternal return.

2. The serpent and the life

Man and serpent are rivals, opposed to each other, complementary. Man is said to have a snake-like quality, which escapes understanding. For this reason, psychoanalists consider that "the serpent is a vertebrate creature embodying the lower psyche, hidden psychosis and what is unusual, incomprehensible and mysterious"[6].

In its simplicity of form, as it is more often represented as a straight or sinuous line, it is the most challenging to the spirit, since in this way it is reduced to its primordial expression. André Virel states that it can be assimilated to a straight simple line, only this line is alive, an embodied abstraction, since the line has no beginning and no end, "once it comes

[3] Hans Biedermann, Hans, *Dicţionar de simboluri*, Editura Saeculum I.O., Bucureşti, 2002 p. 472
[4] Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dicţionar de simboluri,* volumul 3, Editura Artemis, Bucureşti, 1993, p.416
[5] Ibid.
[6] Jung C.G., *L'homme à la découverte de son âme: structure et functionnement de l'inconscient*, Payot, Paris, 1967, p. 237

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alive, it becomes capable of depicting whatever you like or of changing into any shape"[7]. Keyserling considers that the snake is not only an archetype, but an archetypal complex, that "all possible snakes together form one single primordial manifoldness, an inseverable primordial Something which yet is ever coiling and uncoiling, which is ever melting away and re-emerging"[8]. This primordial Something is actually latent life, "the lowest layer of life". It is the well-spring, potentiality, from which all manifestation derives. "Nethermost Life", he continues, "must needs be reflected in daylight consciousness in the form of a snake as indeed the Chaldeans had but one word for Serpent and Life"[9].

The snake's habit of changing its skin at certain intervals has been associated to a rebirth and thus the snake has become "the symbol of life throwing off the past and continuing to live"[10]. This periodic change has also been associated with the quarters of the moon, its rising and growing sequences. René Guénon focuses on the same meaning: "serpent symbolism is, in fad, linked to the notion of life itself"[11].

The first aspect that Klimt captures is associated to life and the serpent's role in healing as it is presented in the mural he painted for the University, bearing the title *Medicine*. At the bottom, at equal distance between life and death, Hygeia is standing. She is painted as in other classical representations, with the snake winding along one hand and a goblet in the other. Her red dress is decorated with golden circles and stylized ivy leaves, as in the ancient representations. In the initial sketch and in the composition design, she had vine leaves in her hair, which were eventually replaced with golden laurel leaves, flowers and berries. Such details can be related to Asklepios, who, in one of the versions of the myth, is Apollo's son. (which could explain why one of his emblems was the laurel wreath). Hygeia was the daughter and helper of Asklepios, the god of medicine and healing. In turn, as the goddess of health and cleanliness, Hygeia played an important role in the cult of her father. While Asklepios was mainly associated to healing, she was associated to prevention of illness and maintenance of good health. The symbol traditionally associated with her is the goblet she shares with the serpent. It is the same serpent of wisdom to be seen on Asklepios' staff which is the symbol of medicine.

Another painting by Klimt where the serpent is present is *Nuda Veritas* (1899). It dates from the symbolistic stage of his creation and, on first analysis, it displays the elements of a classical allegory with the traditional motifs: the veil, the mirror and the serpent. It is extremely interesting, as it cannot be discusses in the terms of a simple allegory, since it has a meaning that transcends it. It is true to say that, generally, allegories in art have taken a woman's shape; however, in this particular case the female character also presents herself – as a woman, and she is not only a mediator for what she is supposed to signify.

On the other hand, this character that impersonates the *Truth* is associated by the artist to the mirror and the serpent as attributes that tradition (especially in the baroque art through its emblems) associates with *Prudence*[12]. In 1880, using the technique called etching, Max

[7] Jean Chevalier, op. cit., p. 298
[8] Herman Keyserling, *Méditations sud-américaines*, Editions Stock, Paris, 1977, p. 222
[9] Ibid., p. 21
[10] Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, Anchor Books, New York, 1991, p. 45
[11] René Guénon, *Symboles fondamentaux de la Science Sacrée*, Paris, 1962, p. 159
[12] James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, John Murray Publisher, London, 1996, p. 254

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Klinger – an artist much appreciated by Klimt and his Sezession collegues – had created a piece by the title *The Serpent* belonging to the series *Eve and the future* in which the serpent holds the mirror to her. The nude female figure in profile standing on tiptoes looks at herself in the mirror.

Nuda Veritas is actually the artist's declaration of war against the academic artistic ideal. Thus, this painting is an example of representation according to the tenets of *Jugendstil* symbolism, where the female principle is seen as dangerous and instinctual. That is why this painting allows Klimt to analyse instinctual life and opens the way to his future stages and works. Through her body posture, the female character brings forward her sexuality. She tries to seduce through her fixed look and her rich scarlet hair strewn with flowers half covering her breasts. Eroticism is also suggested by the feminine elements (the sensuous body with a generous hip line, her rounded belly, her navel), as well as by the serpent winding around her feet.

The woman's eyes seems to have the same symbolic function as the mirros she is holding: the eyes as the window to the soul. The position of the snake is also interesting: although it has obvious sexual connotations, its presence is somewhat paradoxical – it does not appear to be the tempter, instigating to the knowledge of good and evil; rather it is similar to the serpent around Asklepios' staff, the symbol of medicine. Which could then be the "ailment" that *Nuda Veritas* can cure? It could well be the "disease of the modern man" analyzed by Nietzsche and reflected by the serpent's eyes that serve as mirrors. In *Untimely Meditations II*.5, Nietzsche speaks about the disease of the modern man, which is his "weakened personality". The same weakened personality is the result of the divide between "the outer and the iner part," between appearance and essence, between the body and the spirit, an imbalance between the form and the content.

3. The serpent and the death

The snake is associated to death in many cultures as a symbol of the underworld. This is most likely related to its hidden existence, in holes in the ground, and to its venomous, often lethal bite.

Procession of the Dead (1903). This creation, along with three others (*Philosophy, Medicine, Jurisprudence*) created for the University, was destroyed in the fire at the Immendorf Palace. Ematiated, hairless, withered skeletal bodies, with sunken abdomens, are carried by a stream to the underworld. They no longer have faces and therefore the artist presents them with heir heads turned. A soul no longer "inhabits" those bodies, they are no longer persons, human beings. A significant detail is the presence of the snakes which accompany them on their way: threatening, dangerous. It is no longer the image of the harmless snake, the symbol of healing on Hygeia's arm, but the negatively connoted image of the serpent. This is a relvant comment on the painting: "inspect again his work *Procession of the Dead.* How many hours will the artist have spent that summer in Professor Zuckerkandl's dissection room to draw patiently and extract from death in its entirety such a stiff cadaverous combination of colours and lines. Stylized bodies in white shrouds are floating carried by a mysterious stream and by thin limber dark-blue snakes with golden heads"[13].

[13] Ludwig Hevesi, *Acht Jahre Secession*, Klagenfurt, 1984, p. 449

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4. The Klimtian allegory of the *Envy* - a Schopenhauerian perspective

In *The World as Will and Representation, I*, Schopenhauer claims that one of the masks or disguises under which the will to live presents itself is envy. The human being, as a phenomenon of the Will, never ceases to compare his own satisfactions, be they real or imaginary, with the possible satisfaction presented by his intelligence. Then, Schopenhauer claims, envy appears and any deprivation is amplified when compared to someone else's pleasure, and also becomes more easily bearable at the thought that others may be equally deprived.

According to Schopenhauer, envy is a special type of suffering, which does not imply an ailment or physical pain. It is a type of sufferig afflicting some souls at the sight of someone else's happiness, welfare or any kind of achievement.

Envy can run through many stages and levels of intensity. A really vicious form of envy is that caused by the fellow humans' personal qualities, since in it the envious is left with nothing. This thought of Schopenhauer's continues that of Petrarca, whom he actually quotes: "It seems that, more than others, those people are envied who can rise through the sheer power of their wings and free themselves from the cage in which the others are still captive."

The human being is supposed to love and appreciate special qualities – that is, precisely what he envies; hence its immoral nature. Although it is infernal to rejoice at someone else's misery, envy remains a characteristic of human nature, says Schopenhauer. The sufferings that are common to all people hardly impress us. It is worse misfortunes than ours that impress us and seemingly alleviate our pain.

The human endowed with a strong will understand that any satisfaction is sheer appearance, that anything one obtains is in fact far from the actual object of one's wishes and it does not result in final satisfaction to his will. He will realize that "a wish that has been satisfied will only change its appearance and take a new one to torture the human even more"[14].

Klimt represents *Envy* (1898) allegorically. This time he chooses a female character of a weakly appearance, with unfocused eyes, with a snake round her neck and a floral wreath as well (a kind of „golden brake for an old mule") for spurious embellishment.

In several other pieces of the same artist, a central role is played by the character's eyes – windows to the soul. This woman's eyes, an embodiment of envy – express everything. It is the type of look described in the Biblical texts as the envious casting the "evil eye" (for example, "And Saul did not look on David with a good eye", 1 Kings, 18, 6-9).

The less powerful withered hands are, the more they want to grab, as wishes are countless. The character in full black attire (the drawing uses Indian ink) is standing in a field of thorns. Their sharp spiky flowers and leaves are drawn in a stylized manner and the motif is repeated endlessly. This use of the thorn motif is significant in itself, as it was related to the city of Nancy, whose emblem it was and which was the "capital of Art Nouveau." Black is also the value (non-colour) chosen by the artist for the background behind the female

[14] Schopenhauer, *Lumea ca voinţă şi reprezentare*, Editura Moldova, Iaşi, 1995, p. 392

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character representing envy, which is actually its horizon. A minimum of means for a maximum of effects.

The snake of envy circling round the neck of the character completes the symbolic meaning of the drawing. It is the same snake that thrust its poisonous fangs in the human's heart, that Dante talked about in *La Divina Commedia*, 2, XIV, 82-84: "Envy boiled so hot, raging in my blood/ That any time another man was glad/ You would have seen me burning purple and red"[15].

5. Another meanings

Two of Klimt's paintings present the snake in its menacing dangerous aspect: *Beethoven Frieze* (1902) and *Jurisprudence* (1903-7). The second panel in *Beethoven Frieze*, known as *Hostile Forces*, brings together a number of menacing figures: the Gorgon sisters, Typhon, Illness, Madness and Death, as well as a number of vices. The three Gorgon sisters are described as female monsters, hideous terrifying apparitions with head full of snakes, bronze arms and golden wings, copper claws and wild boar fangs. Their fiery piercing eyes could turn to stone any living creature. Euryale (she who can jump far) and Sthenno (the strong one) were immortal, but Medusa (the queen) was the only mortal one and was eventually killed by Perseus. Their deformities present the corrupted forms of the three instincts: sociability, sexuality and spirituality[16]. Thus sexual perverseness is associated with Euryale, social perverseness is associated with Sthenno, while spiritual perverseness is associated to Medusa, which symbolizes "the corrupted image of the self [...] the image that can petrify"[17].

In other paintings (*Pallas Athena,*1898), Klimt chose to paint the well known image of Medusa as she was portrayed in stone on Athen's shield. In the frieze, she has a body and is alive (as are her sisters) and snakes undulate through her hair. They resemble rather well the female figures in *Jurisprudence*. Behind the Gorgon sisters there are three menacing figures, presented as hideous and repulsive: Disease, Madness and Death. The next in line is the giant Typhon, a mythical monster with snakes covering his body and with a hundred dragon heads for fingers. His size is so overwhelming that the can actually reach the eastern and western ends of the world with his stretched arms. This detail is emphasized by Klimt: Typhon's stretched wings cover the width of the painting to "protect" this world populated by hideous or vicious characters whose father he is. Klimt, however, chose an aesthetic representation – the monster is presented with shiny nacre eyes and countless snakelike tentacles and snake tails.

In the three paintings in which the artist represented Athena, the serpent is on the goddess' aegis in a repetitive fashion (in the absence of the model that tradition in sculpture has handed down in time, namely of the serpent at her feet, next to her round shield).

In *Jurisprudence*, the snake plays the same role as in the *Beethoven Frieze*. Here, The Truth, Justice, and Law are allegorically opposed to the three Erinyes, surrounded by snakes

[15] Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, translated by Burton Raffel, Northwestern University Press, 2010, p. 246; („My blood was so with envy set on fire,/That if I had beheld a man make merry,/ Thou wouldst have seen me sprinkled o'er with pallor", translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, p. 179)
[16] Jean Chevalier, op. cit., vol.II, p. 105
[17] Paul Diel, apud. Jean Chevalier, *Dicţionar de simboluri*, vol.II, p. 105

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in a direct attack at the hypocritical spirits of his time represented in these three sexual archetypes. *Hope I* (1903) introduces again the negative image of a black menacing snake in opposition to the central image representing the hope for life.

Yet another (final) meaning of the snake can be found in the two paintings *The Water Serpents* (1904-7), where intertwined bodies of lesbos and aqueous plants are carried away by the stream. Klimt gives this title to the paintings on account of the relation between the snake and the vital element water which equally symbolizes fertility. A simpler explanation is also that the course of water streams is winding like that of snakes.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that in *Adam and Eve* (1917-18) the snake is absent. The entire tradition that dealt with this theme (long and rich in titles: Dürer, Rubens, Titian, Michelangelo, Cranach) presents the two together with the great tempter. The painting may not have been completed and there is a space between the two which through further chromatic additions could have been or become the skin of a panther … or a snake.

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