

## THE SNAKE UNDER THE SKIN

FREE ASSOCIATION ON THE THEME OF *LACHESIS*

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Science, since the time of Descartes, has tended to fragment and isolate the objects of its study, and modern medicine, a science rather than an art, follows this tendency. Recently, under the name of psychosomatic medicine, there has been an attempt to reunite man's body and soul in the medical mind, and this should be welcome to followers of Hahnemann, who from the first stressed the unity of the human person. An even bolder suggestion is that every man contains within himself the universe, as well as being contained by it. This is akin to the view of C. G. Jung who holds that in the human psyche (and by psyche he means body and mind, though his work has been mostly with the latter) all possible qualities exist. Not all of them are conscious, but those which are not are there, in the unconscious. (Another, and perhaps old-fashioned, way of stating this view is to say that man was made in the image of God).

Jung found that logical reasoning was not adequate to describe the human psyche, and in order to study it in his patients he used the method of Free Association. The patient was encouraged to express his ideas naturally as they led to one another. In this way a vast hinterland of symbolism and mythology came to light, which Jung has called the Collective Unconscious. It is recognizable in the myths and traditions of primitive peoples, the hallucinations of the insane, and the dreams and analyses of normal people. It had order, but not logical order. The Imaginative order, as it has been called, has had a profound influence on modern poetry and art generally.

Now, on reading the homœopathic materia medica, one is often struck by the symbolic appropriateness of a remedy (perhaps its name, or its occurrence in nature), to the conditions it causes, and therefore cures, in patient or prover. The ancient "Doctrine of Signatures" was, of course, based on this observation. It might, therefore, be interesting to submit a homœo-

pathic remedy to a sort of modified Jungian analysis; and alongside its occurrence in nature, its physical features and its provings, to study its place in mythology and legend and in the collective unconscious, giving free rein to the imagination, and wandering down any promising symbolic avenues which may present themselves. This has been attempted in the following essay on the greatest of the snake venom remedies, *Lachesis*.

Snakes are found all over the world except in New Zealand, Ireland (from whence St. Patrick is supposed to have banished them), and a few isolated oceanic islands. On the whole they become more numerous, larger and/or more venomous as the Equator is neared. Non-poisonous snakes include grass snakes, burrowing snake, boas and pythons. The poisonous varieties may be grouped according to the effects of their toxins into (a) Colubridae and Elapidae, whose chief toxic effect is upon the central nervous system and the blood, whose coagulability is increased; (b) Hydrophidae or water snakes, whose poison affects mainly the peripheral nerves; and (c) Viperidae and Crotalidae, the effect of whose poison is local sepsis and necrosis, decreased blood-coagulability and central nervous collapse. The Crotalidae or Pit Vipers, so called from a small sensory pit on either side of the head which is said to be a heat-detecting organ for locating their prey at night, include both the species *Crotalus horridus*, the American rattlesnake, and *Lachesis muta*, the surucucu or bushmaster of Brazil. The latter is a formidable creature, growing to a length of six or seven feet (some reports say eleven to fourteen feet), and thick as a man's thigh. It is one of the few snakes which will attack man unprovoked. This together with the fact that it is a very wild snake, liable to pine and die in captivity, means that the venom is difficult to obtain. Every account of its collection makes an adventure story—the best known, of course, being that of Constantine Hering with his first, involuntary, proving of the remedy.

Mythology and tradition, as well as nature in the warmer latitudes, abound with snakes. Man has always been fascinated by this paradoxical creature which glides over land without feet as a fish does in water, sleeps without apparently closing its eyes (actually it sees without ever opening them) and

hears without ears. It is the first animal to have a speaking part in the Bible, and plays an important role in the drama of Eden. In the hands of Moses it had healing as well as destructive significance. In Ancient Greece it was the creature of Hermes, the Messenger God, and he bequeathed it to Aesculapius the god of healing, since when it has been the badge of all physicians. In the temple of Aesculapius the serpent guarded the temple treasure, in the temples of Mithras it coiled about the rock from which the god was born, coiled around the Tree of Life it guards the tree's fruit, as the dragon Fafnir it guarded the treasure of the Nibelungs. It is the Dragon who guards the Maiden and whom the Hero must slay. It is immortal as Hercules, the Strong Man (who was plagued by snakes from the cradle to the funeral pyre) found, when he cut off the Hydra's heads, only to have new ones grow in their places. And, though he overcame it, this same Lernaean Hydra was the cause of his death, through its poison in the tip of one of his own arrows, and the jealousy of his wife.

The serpent is a symbol highly charged with sex, and yet it is not confined to either sex. (Neither are snakes. Any snake, surprised and seen gliding rapidly away, could be male or female). Old pictures of the Fall of Man show the snake with a woman's head, and there is a legend that she was Lilith, a pre-human wife of Adam, who through jealousy tempted Eve and so brought about man's fall. Lilith afterwards became a Lamia, or nightmare (see also Keat's poem, "Lamia", which deals with a snake-woman). On the other hand, the Christian tradition identifies the serpent in Eden with the devil, Lucifer or Satan, who, though angelically sexless, is usually considered as male. The phallic symbolism of the snake poised to strike is unmistakable. In Jung's view the snake, creeping out of its hole in the ground, represents the male aspect of the Great Mother, the libido of introversion (because in woman the male side is introverted, the female side manifest). Elsewhere he speaks of the serpent as symbolizing libido in opposition, libido turned back upon itself. Thus the snake coiled around the tree symbolizes the mother guarded from incest by this repressed libido.

The snake can also be a symbol of death. The stone serpents guarding the treasure in the temple of Aesculapius represented the souls of the dead. Serpents were sent to menace the life of new-born Hercules. And an asp was Cleopatra's executioner.

There is no doubt that snakes have had a hold on men's imaginations since before recorded history. But nowadays, when millions of the world's population live in big cities in temperate lands, and never see a snake unless they make a special visit to the zoo, have serpents become less important in our lives? If our defence of the Doctrine of Signatures is to hold, it would seem not to be so, for the snake venoms are used as much as ever in Homœopathy, and frequently in the cases of people who have had no contact with snakes. What has happened to the serpents, then? Have they retreated to the Unconscious, together with the Phoenix, the Unicorn and the Sphinx? Undoubtedly they are there, but they are still represented in the world outside us. Man has created his own serpents, of iron and steel and rubber and copper. Up and down our maps they glide, up and down the country, railways, arterial roads, sewers, water pipes, gas mains, electric cables, dynamos, vacuum cleaners, the thing that cleans the septic tank and the thing that "sweeps" the chimney. The Atlantic Cable has taken over half the job of the Midgard Serpent (it has not yet negotiated the Pacific Ocean); the serpent coiled around the dynamo generates the electric libido of our civilization; Aesculapius's staff is represented by the stethoscope (the very word is a hiss). Most modern man-made snakes are concerned with power, transport of vital or waste materials, or communications (as befits creatures of Hermes). They are to be found in all sizes; some are harmless and some very dangerous, as anyone who interferes with a high-tension cable or an express train is bound to find out.

Our bodies, too, are full of snakes which carry messages, supplies and waste products. There is *Naja*, the cobra of Kundalini Yoga, coiled up in the base of the spine, which rises up the spinal column to rear its hood over the brain stem. Lesser colubrines and sea snakes inhabit the peripheral nerves. Pythons

and constrictors in various sizes live in the gut, and draw their length over the food masses committed to them. The vipers, perhaps the snakiest snakes of all, whose venom acts chiefly upon the blood, have first right to the great blood-vessels. Arteries, streaking straight for the spot like a snake striking at its prey; veins, sinuously curving towards a sunny rock on a hot afternoon; blood unceasingly flowing through the system, renewed by the breath of life at each circuit, bringing the supplies necessary to maintain life. Where a channel is occluded a new one is formed, the Lernaean Hydra grows another head, so that life may go on. Would it be carrying the analogy too far to assign the great veins to *Crotalus horridus*, the king of the rattlesnakes, whose action is on the right side of the body, and to name the great arteries as the chief domain of left-sided *Lachesis*?

*Lachesis muta* is named after one of the three Fates, she who casts the lot to decide when a man's days are done. The surucuccu's bite is usually rapidly fatal, but all viper bites show common features. There is marked local reaction (in contrast to the colubrines and sea snakes) with severe pain, swelling, discoloration and thrombosis. Death may follow from the following causes: (a) If a vein has been pierced, quickly from thrombosis (the poison causes coagulation initially; hæmolysis is a later action)); (b) after some hours, through paralysis of the vasomotor centres; (c) after a few days, from secondary bleeding, due to the hæmolytic action of the venom; (d) later, from septic infection of the area round the bite.

The provings of *Lachesis* have mostly been made with the 30th potency, and show some symptoms related to the secondary effects of the poison, with others which bear little or no relation to the crude toxic effects. It has the great viperine characteristics of sensitivity, aggravation from sleep, and relief from discharges (with its converse, aggravation from failure of an expected discharge), together with a marked modality of its own, left-sidedness. The parts most affected are the mind, the throat, the heart, vascular system and blood, and the female genital system.

The prominent mental characteristics are jealousy (the green-

eyed monster?), suspicion, which represents the sensitivity of the remedy, and loquacity. The latter, though very characteristic, may alternate with a sullen mutism and the flow of words may take the place of a relieving discharge. There is often sadness and agitated depression. *Lachesis* is indicated in affective states especially where paranoia is present.

The throat in *Lachesis* is very sensitive to touch exteriorly, and tight clothing cannot be tolerated (this is also true of the abdomen). Interiorly it is also sensitive, and swallowing is painful, with this peculiarity, that empty swallowing hurts more than swallowing fluids (cold, but not hot, fluids are tolerated), and solids go down easiest of all. One recalls the egg-eating snake which swallows eggs whole, cracking the shells with its modified cervical vertebrae.

In the cardiovascular system the *Lachesis* picture may be one of heart failure with congestion (as in the man-made snakes, the arterial roads), worse after sleep when poisonous metabolites have collected in the stagnant blood. There may be pallor, or, more typically, cyanosis. Hæmorrhages when they occur (e.g. epistaxis) give relief. (*Crotalus horridus* is an even more hæmorrhagic remedy). All *Lachesis* hæmorrhages tend to contain dark clots, described as like charred straw. Petechiae and ecchymoses in the skin are another of the hæmolytic signs.

Women show symptoms of *Lachesis* particularly at puberty and the menopause. The suspicious, jealous mentality is likely to be marked at these times, and all symptoms are aggravated by the failure of expected menstruation, ameliorated by its appearance. In the Guarani tribe of Southern Brazil the onset of puberty in a girl is expressed in the words, "The snake has bitten her". At the climacteric hot flushes often occur especially when menstruation does not, and improve if it can be re-established.

The modalities of *Lachesis* are that it dislikes extremes of temperature, especially heat, wind, damp, sunlight and the spring, no doubt thereby showing a desire to creep into a dry temperate cave. Its annual aggravation recalls the snake's annual shedding of its skin.

*Lachesis* is a markedly left-sided remedy, and lesions, in the head, in the throat, in the chest, start on the left side and cross

over to the right (cf. *Lycopodium*, where they start on the right and cross over to the left). An exception is in the abdomen, where symptoms may be on the right from the first; but as it has been pointed out, the gut is embryologically a left-sided structure. No explanation has yet been given as to why *Lachesis* should be left-sided; but if we think symbolically of the serpent-devil in Eden, and of the Demon King in the pantomime who *always* come in from the left side of the stage and crosses over to the right, it becomes rather a question of explaining why any snake venom remedy (such as *Crotalus horridus*) can have a right-sided action!

The left-sidedness of *Lachesis* serves to introduce a comparison between it and *Lycopodium*, Hahnemann's great remedy prepared from the spores of club-moss, whose symptoms start on the right and cross over to the left. If *Lachesis* is the remedy of surface communications, *Lycopodium* is that of jet propulsion and the atomic bomb; whilst the snake pours its venom through a wound into the bloodstream, the spores have to be exploded to yield up their virtue. *Lycopodium* is insidious, chronic, dry, showing an insufficiency of metabolic forces, an inadequacy of secretion, a hardening of living tissue, a general slowing down of the stream of life. Symptoms often start in the gastro-intestinal mucosa and travel centripetally to the head and brain. In *Lachesis*, on the other hand, everything is centrifugal, violent, warm, moist, pulsating with blood which may be poisoned but must flow, and if discharges are stopped their back-pressure distresses the whole organism. Both resent extremes of temperature, but *Lachesis* likes cool dark rooms (caves) and cold drinks, whilst *Lycopodium* seeks sunlight, open air and hot drinks. Both are sensitive physically, *Lycopodium* (full of air, and eructating) to pressure, *Lachesis* (full of blood) to touch. Both are hungry, but a large amount of food relieves *Lachesis*, whilst a little produces a sense of fulness and discomfort in *Lycopodium*. In the mental sphere, *Lycopodium* is the introverted self-regarding intellectual, afraid that his powers are failing, afraid of breaking down under stress, anticipating events, critical (and above all self-critical). He dislikes company but fears to be alone, may very well have cranky ideas but does not

like his enthusiasm to show, and if by any chance his pent-up feelings do escape him, it is in a violent explosion comparable with the bursting of the spores. *Lachesis* is just the opposite, extraverted, over-expressive, impelled by feelings, sensitive melancholy, jealous, suspicious and passionate.

It might be supposed that a remedy which combined the features of *Lycopodium* and *Lachesis* would be of spectacular value. There is a story told of George Bernard Shaw and of a beautiful woman who suggested to him that he should be the father of her child, "because with my beauty and your brains he would be a prodigy". "Yes, dear lady," was Shaw's reply, "but supposing he had *my* beauty and *your* brains?"

Such a phenomenon might be *Lac. caninum*, which though a very ancient remedy (used by Pliny, amongst others) and of proved value in Homœopathy, has not attained the eminence of *Lachesis* and *Lycopodium*. It has features in common with both these remedies, notably its outstanding modality that symptoms begin on one side of the body, cross over to the other side, and then cross back again. (*Lachesis*, symptoms on left, crossing over to right. *Lycopodium*, start on right and cross to left). Like *Lachesis* it is extremely sensitive, and cannot bear to be touched on any part of the body; and, again like *Lachesis*, the throat and female genital system are important spheres of action. Also symptoms are worse after sleep. The mental symptoms recall *Lycopodium*: absentmindedness, anxiety, fear, of being alone, of disease, of making mistakes; but *Lac. caninum* really *does* make mistakes, in speech and in writing, etc., whereas *Lycopodium* often puts up a good performance after painful anticipation. *Lac. caninum* flies into a rage, and curses and swears; and she has dreams and hallucinations of snakes which should be a link with *Lachesis*, though the exact connection is not clear. For that matter, the source of the remedy ties up with the name of *Lycopodium*, which means "wolf's paw". Freely associating from there, one remembers that the twin founders of Rome were suckled by a wolf (has *Lac. lupinum* been proved yet?) and that one of these later killed his brother, as Cain killed Abel, from jealousy. . . .



The serpent, then, is passion, jealousy, vital communication, movement, power, libido. But for its deepest meaning we must return to the events which took place in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve, the man and the woman, exist in each one of us; they represent the twin tides of life, flow and ebb, expiration and inspiration, contraction and relaxation, waking and sleep. The serpent, the rebellious libido, came between them, disturbing their unconscious perfection, depriving them of Paradise, and bringing upon them all the ills which men inherit.

That is only the beginning of the story. Without trauma there can be no development of the conscious personality. Without the Fall there could have been no Redeemer. "O felix culpa," sings the Church, "quae talem ac tantum meruit habere Redemptorem." And the fault which enslaved man was also in some strange way the Force which set him free. Moses understood this when he erected the brazen Serpent to save the Israelites from the plague of fiery serpents. Mediæval Christian artists understood, when they depicted Christ as a Serpent in the Communion Cup. That which hurts can also heal; and heal, moreover, so that the last state is better than the first. This is the same truth which inspired Samuel Hahnemann when he propounded the law "Similia Similibus Curentur".

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### THE SNAKE VENOMS OF THE MATERIA MEDICA

(Grouped in genera and species with synonyms  
and vernacular name)

Family	VIPERIDAE		
Sub-Family	CROTALINAE		
	<b>BOTHROPS ATROX</b>		
	Synonyms	...	... Coluber atrox
			... Lachesis lanceolatus
	Homœopathic nomenclature	...	... <i>Bothrops lanceolatus</i>
	Vernacular name	...	... Fer-de-lance