

## THE THERIOMORPHIC REPRESENTATIONS OF CONCHIS IN JOHN FOWLES'S *THE MAGUS*

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*Abstract: The present paper aims to depict the resemblance between the figure of Conchis, the polymath owner of Bourani, where Nicholas, the protagonist and narrator of The Magus, is to receive his initiation, and the Jungian archetype of the shadow. In analytical psychology, the shadow encompasses those aspects of the psyche that are undesired, consciously or unconsciously repressed, hidden and dark. It has been said to designate „the inferior personality, the lowest levels of which are indistinguishable from the instinctuality of an animal” (Jung, CW vol. 9, II: par. 370). Similarly, in The Magus, Conchis is repeatedly described by Nicholas in theriomorphic terms that hint at the shadow archetype, fact that allows us to state, considering the fact that the faults we best observe in others represent our own unconscious shortcomings, our shadow, that Nicholas is meant to gradually acknowledge and integrate his repressed characteristics. The aim of the paper is to offer an in-depth analysis of the psychological mechanisms illustrated in the novel by discussing the relevance of symbolic association.*

*Keywords: shadow, theriomorphic imagery, self, archetypal pattern, dichotomy.*

At the beginning of their meeting, Conchis is described by Nicholas in highly theriomorphic terms, as being “saurian as well as simian” (Fowles, 2004: 81), fact that allows us to state, considering the fact that the faults we best observe in others represent our own unconscious shortcomings, that Nicholas is meant to gradually acknowledge and integrate his repressed characteristics, including the more primitive animal instincts (without allowing them to supersede conscious morality), since they are still an integral part of our personality.

In other words, as Jung best put it in his famous phrase connected to the shadow archetype, “projections change the world into the replica of one's own unknown face” (Jung, CW vol. 9, II: par. 17); we need to be on guard against the projections we unconsciously make as “the effect of projection is to isolate the subject from his environment, since instead of a real relation to it there is now only an illusory one” (Jung, CW vol. 9, II: par. 17). Furthermore, the theriomorphic associations repeatedly used by Nicholas to describe Conchis are representative for the fact that the shadow is amoral – neither good nor bad – just like animals. The relation between the shadow archetype and the animal instincts inherent to human nature is that the shadow works as a regulator, aiming at an assimilation of the primitive instincts “in a purposeful whole,” Jung insisting that “it is under all circumstances an advantage to be in full possession of one's personality, otherwise the repressed elements will only crop up as a hindrance elsewhere” (Jung, CW vol. 7: par. 28), disrupting the balance at the level of the personality.

There are other negative features Nicholas attributes to Conchis as soon as he meets him, characterizing him as being as narcissistic, cosmopolitan and mad (Fowles: 2004: 81-85), unconsciously but justly describing himself with these attributes that symbolize his deficient relation to reality. Another noteworthy feature Nicholas observes in Conchis is his “snake-like swiftness” (Fowles, 2004: 86). As

mentioned in the introduction, the snake is one of the theriomorphic representations of the shadow, since “traditionally, the snake stands for the vulnerable spot in man: it personifies his shadow, i.e., his weakness and unconsciousness” (Jung, *CW* vol. 9, II: par. 390), just as Conchis personifies Nicholas’s personal unconscious dimension which he needs to come to terms with. Jung (*CW* vol. 9, II: par. 291) further describes the snake as a favourite symbol “for describing psychic happenings or experiences that suddenly dart out of the unconscious and have a frightening or redeeming effect,” just as Conchis and the entire Bourani domain seem indeed to have sprung out of Nicholas’s unconscious, and despite the therapeutic aim, Nicholas is often downright frightened: “he quite definitely frightened me. It was the kind of illogical fear of the supernatural that in others made me sneer” (Fowles, 2004: 102). The connection between fear and supernatural or magic is reasserted in connection to Conchis: “I fell under the spell of Conchis the magician again. Frightened, but fascinated” (Fowles, 2004: 376).

The symbolism of the totemic reptile is thus extremely rich: its inherent cold-bloodedness refers, according to Jung, to the “inhuman contents and tendencies of an abstractly intellectual as well as a concretely animal nature: in a word, the extra-human quality in man” (Jung, *CW* vol. 9, II: par. 291). It therefore personifies our dark, inferior personality, which is slippery and unfathomable to the consciousness, just as Conchis is perceived by Nicholas. Jung goes on arguing that

since the shadow, in itself, is unconscious for most people, the snake would correspond to what is totally unconscious and incapable of becoming conscious, but which, as the collective unconscious and as instinct, seems to possess a peculiar wisdom of its own and a knowledge that is often felt to be supernatural. This is the treasure which the snake (or dragon) guards, and also the reason why the snake signifies evil and darkness on the one hand and wisdom on the other. Its unrelatedness, coldness, and dangerousness express the instinctuality that with ruthless cruelty rides roughshod over all moral and any other human wishes and considerations and is therefore just as terrifying and fascinating in its effects as the sudden glance of a poisonous snake. (Jung, *CW* vol. 9, II: par. 370)

Nicholas often feels Conchis overpowers his sense of reasoning, he constantly feels baffled and taken aback by his figure, without being able to accurately describe him: “Not only his age but everything about him was difficult to tell” (Fowles, 2004: 85). By comparing Conchis’s movement of the head to that of a snake, Nicholas creates a comprehensive imagery around the mystery-laden figure, especially in the view of our Jungian reading. First of all, the snake, just as the shadow archetype that it personifies, entails both a dimension of instinctuality, as well as one of numinosity, antagonists that are also intrinsic to human nature; however, since “the ordinary man has not reached this point of tension: he has it merely in the unconscious, i.e., in the serpent,” (Jung, *CW* vol. 9, II: par. 390); one needs to acknowledge and integrate polarity in order to surpass uniformity and one-sidedness.

Jung (*CW* vol. 9, II: par. 285-286) extensively discusses the duality of the snake as a symbol for the “dark, chthonic world of instinct,” one the one hand, and as

a symbol of “wisdom, and hence of light, goodness, and healing.” This latent dichotomy is what the human nature ultimately needs to understand how to tackle,

for it turns out that all archetypes spontaneously develop favourable and unfavourable, light and dark, good and bad effects. In the end we have to acknowledge that the self is a *complexio oppositorum* precisely because there can be no reality without polarity (Jung, *CW* vol. 9, II: par. 423).

Instead of being torn between the contraries that make up the personality, as the vast majority of people “do not have sufficient range of consciousness to become aware of the opposites inherent in human nature,” and “the tensions they generate remain for the most part unconscious” (Jung, *CW* vol. 9, II: par. 390), man needs to assimilate both sides of an antagonistic pair, which results in a third element, a vehicle for inner balance. In this line of thought, Julie, who stands out for mystery, the indefinable and the unattainable and June, who represents instinctuality and temptation, both attract Nicholas, who does not initially see that the two opposite mirror-images actually converge into the figure of Alison.

In the masque, Nicholas is presented with many instances and facets of duality and antagonists: “these experiences of split or double personality actually form the core of the earliest psychopathological investigations,” and these dichotomies imply that “the split-off personality is not just a random one, but stands in a complementary or compensatory relationship to the ego-personality” (Jung, *CW* vol. 9, I: par. 468). In the novel, character construction, as well as narrative structure seem to bear a deeper, sometimes overt, reflection in the mirror: the twins Julie/June, Alison as “oxymoron,” the analogy created between de Deukans and Nicholas, on the one hand, and between John Fowles and Maurice Conchis, on the other hand, Lily Montgomery and Mrs. Lily de Seitas, the temporal opposition past-present highlighted through the voice of the character-narrator and the spatial circularity of the narrative. As mentioned before, the narrative circularity can also be read as an allegory for the individuation process, which has been expressed according to Jung through the symbol of the mandala and the uroboros: “The alchemists were fond of picturing their opus as a circulatory process, as a circular distillation or as the uroboros, the snake biting its own tail” (Jung, *CW* vol. 9, II: par. 418). The symbol of the uroboros recurs towards the ending of the narrative as part of Anubis’s mask, surmounted atop of his staff, reinforcing the idea that the trial represents Nicholas’s disillusionment from the Godgame, and his stepping closer towards individuation.

Another connotation of the snake, according to Jung (*CW* vol. 5: par. 146), is that of the phallic representation of the libido, understood as psychic energy: the analogy with “the snake comparison is unmistakably phallic. The phallus is the source of life and libido [...], and as such it was worshipped everywhere.” This is to say, when encountered, the symbol of the snake calls the subject’s attention to the investment of psychic energy, in our case, Nicholas Urfe must withdraw the exceedingly high amount of energy invested into the persona archetype, and direct it unabatedly into the gradually emerging shadow archetype, giving rise to “a possible synthesis of the conscious and unconscious elements of knowledge and action”

(Jung, *CW* 9, I: par. 180-181), synthesis that represents the goal of the individuation process.

The manifold obscene playlets and dramatizations of Greek myths, the satyrs, the ithyphallic Priapus-figures and the recurring pornographic curiosa, apart from suggesting Nicholas's phallocratic tendencies and one-track-mindedness, also hint at the importance of a correct allotment of psychic energy into the unconscious contents, complementary to the conscious material.

As mentioned before, the snake simultaneously embodies the ontological dichotomy good-evil, and therefore allegorically, it also represents the extreme anthropological versions of good and evil, namely Christ and the devil, analogy that is made explicit even in the New Testament (cf. Jung, *CW* vol. 9, II: par. 75). Furthermore, the devil, just as the snake, is also a direct symbol of the shadow archetype since it opposes the psychological one-sidedness of the Christ figure that embodies only one facet of the good-evil dichotomy:

If we see the traditional figure of Christ as a parallel to the psychic manifestation of the self, then the Antichrist would correspond to the shadow of the self, namely the dark half of the human totality, which ought not to be judged too optimistically (Jung, *CW* vol. 9, II: par: 76).

It is striking that in the novel Maurice Conchis is repeatedly dubbed "the old devil" by Nicholas, recurrence which strengthens the parallel between the figure of Conchis and the shadow of the ego-consciousness; several of the masks present at the final trial are also theriomorphic representations of the devil or are devilish figures: the "stag-devil," the "crocodile-devil," the "goat-devil" and the "jackal-devil" (Fowles, 2004: 503), which might hint at the fact that towards the end of the Bourani experience, Nicholas has managed to encounter his shadow, however painstaking the process; throughout the novel, we witness how Nicholas's shadow gains more and more corporeality, initially subtly embodied by Conchis and eventually tangibly represented through the devilish masks in the trial. It is only during the trial that Nicholas finally ascertains his shadow, fact that is narratively conveyed through the feeling that there was "a real devil" in him "that wanted to strike" (Fowles, 2004: 517) during the whipping episode, when he realizes he has "absolute freedom of choice." He also realizes the deliberate analogy created between him and Conchis of the Resistance movements in Greece, and, equally important, he acknowledges that "Wimmel was inside me." Given the fact that Wimmel is depicted in the novel as the paragon of evil, embodying everything immorality, inhumanity and ruthlessness stand for, it is safe to state that Nicholas, by admitting to the existence of such a character inside of him, in fact realizes that his personality also consists of an inferior side made up of highly negative features, features that need to be perceived as an integrated part of personality – the shadow adumbrating his ego-consciousness. The more or less accidental discovery Nicholas later makes in connection to Wimmel, namely that in reality he was a decorated military hero fighting for the Polish

Resistance, reinforces the inherent duality of the ‘devil’ – the shadow, as well as that of Conchis, whose figure also lies at the thin boundary between traitor and hero.

In conclusion, throughout the novel, Nicholas is faced with a representation of his personal unconsciousness, which he needs to learn to relate to and to harmoniously integrate into consciousness so that he can have a better relationship with himself and with others and that he can have a more holistic understanding of life-defining concepts such as love, freedom, authenticity and alterity.

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