

TED BYRNE / *Justice is a Woman: Reading Genève*

Genève is a serial poem based on a shuffle of the major arcana and court cards of the Swiss Tarot deck, also called the 1JJ deck because it replaces *le Pape* and *la Papesse* of the Marseille deck with Jupiter and Juno. It is not insignificant to its reading that the poem makes use of a Protestant deck. One dimension of the poem is that of marriage, “binding” according to Paul, but “made not too strong,” or perhaps not strong enough, according to experience and the vicissitudes of the drives (the “luminous arrows of heaven we inhabit,” 14, XVI The House of God¹).

A serial poem consists of a sequence of stanzas, or rooms, that are not constructed according to a plan. It is made of a series of forgettings that persist and return. Using the Tarot procedurally to structure the poem may seem to contradict this description, but it actually introduces a complementary element of chance that is not, in the non-occult practice employed, undermined by the pre-existing emblems or tableaux.

Genève is a translation of the Tarot cards in much the same way *Kerrisdale Elegies* is a translation of *Duino Elegies*. Both translations can be seen as acts of disrespect or of hubris. The targets merit disrespect: Rilke’s snobbism; the Tarot’s 19th-century appropriation of a good card game to mystic hocus pocus. The translator, as poet, hubristically invests himself with a poetic license to kill, so to speak. Not servant but master. Not fidelity but betrayal—“betrayal by augment” as George Steiner says of Rilke’s translation of Louise Labé’s sonnets. From this perspective, the poetic act has priority, is always prior to what is being translated.

Genève is not a Tarot reading. It is a simultaneous act of reading and making that uses the Tarot for its comprehensive representation of the objects of the world. It proposes itself as an innocent description: “I make no assumptions / about their meanings, / they / are such strangers to me; seeing them, / I will tell what they look like” (Section 16). As such, it seems at first to operate in a register that is flat

1 *Genève* has no pagination, and the sections have no titles, and so, for convenience, I have numbered them in accordance with their sequence in the book, and titled them according to the card being read. Although the deck Bowering used has French titles, I’ve used their English titles, except where these differ from the French title, in which case I’ve translated the French title (as in The House of God, rather than The Tower).

or prosaic, being, as it is, about surfaces and lines. It's hard to determine how and where, after how many readings, this impression is undone. In fact, the reader (that is, the author) is there, on the other side of the picture plane, from the very beginning, by way of projection.

The first two sections describe strong male and female figures: The Knight of Clubs in aggressive battle posture, holding the phallus high, not a wand but a weapon; and the bare-breasted woman called The Star (XVII), announced as a mother by way of denial—"She is no mother of mine." In the first section, the reader asks if he, himself, is not the weapon, the club. That is, the projection is of anger, of affect, not the full figure of an ideal, of the fighter as protector and destroyer. But at the same time he refers to the weapon as a "tree." This is a complex image, one that represents life in its entire cycle, hidden and revealed. It is an image not found in the tableau, but which overwhelms, or wants to overwhelm the father, his horse, and the reader's "loneliness." In the second section, the reader is present in the tableau only by way of denial, the contention that she is not his mother. But she is "the" woman, the image of woman we had no embarrassment in worshipping for millennia, with her "two earthen jugs" and her celestial face, the woman that does not exist (Lacan), with all her "men-children," her caring and cleaning, her knowing. These are not archetypes, but persistent, repressive, and mechanically reproducible images, or stereotypes.

The poem proceeds in a series, carrying thereby a narrative charge, but eluding narrative capture, except in a terminal moment that may have been trumped up. He suggests, in a retrospective presentation of *Genève*, that the Death card may have been moved to the end of the shuffle by, one assumes, his wife, who had reasons of state. The poem was written during a period of "bifurcated" love, as the poet euphemistically describes it, but which in the poem itself is marked as infidelity (Bowering, *How I Wrote* 38). This knowledge forces a kind of psychodramatic reading, as opposed to a merely psycho-dynamic or structural one. I won't be able to exclude this dimension in what follows, but it is certainly not what I wish to pursue. What I want to do is to set forth a hypothesis related to the optical dimension, where reading is a reading into, or a seeing into, a series of mirror-like tableau.

I initially set out to test the following model, which was derived from my first few readings of the poem, but which, I admit, did not really hold up when applied. It seemed to me that the cards can be seen, or read, in four distinct ways:

a) Looking at the tableau and projecting onto it by way of description or interpretation. In this manner, one might see, for example, what one fears or wishes, which is to say what one is not.

b) Being looked at by the tableau, in which case the figures of the tableau are, for example, attacking (“I could get ready for them / as they come over the hill”), or offering (a cup that “contains poison / only for me”), or duping (“How they / set me up”).

c) A movement into the tableau (“The mountains are / a distant horizon / I may step over / to walk away”).

d) Assimilation to a figure in the tableau, for example, in section 5, becoming the victim (“His lolling red tongue / in my mouth”).

I expected that there would be a progression from a) to d) as the reading deepened. In fact, a global reading showed a predominance of a), as is prescribed by the poem’s own rules, substantial occurrences of b), and very few instances that could confirm a progression to c) and d), or even their more than occasional presence in the poem. Rather than try to force the poem into my model by over-reading it, I drew two conclusions. Firstly, the model fails primarily in its anticipation of a progression through different layers of looking. In this respect, c) and d) are remnants of an idealism that the poem does not share with me. If the model has any validity, the different types of reading have to be understood as overlapping, oscillating, or simultaneous. Secondly, the predominance of a) and b) indicates that the poem operates in the realm of neurosis or of normal misery, c) and particularly d) being indications of psychosis. The anxiety that suffuses the poem hovers on that borderline, but the poem itself, the writing, operates as a defense against it.

In this optic, the gaze is directed from a point constructed in the imaginary, which is to say the ego (a). What is regarded, the tableau, is the arena within which the ego is constructed—the objects it desires, the phantasms by which it tracks them, the law that forbids or allows them, the words that give them shape (b). Within this space is also found a knowledge, or truth, a point from which one can see, but not quite ever grasp the conditions of one’s existence (c). There is yet another position, on the far side of the mirror, where one loses access to structured phantasies and the law or they become overwhelming (d).

Of course, there is a narrative, born from the marvelous coincidence of cards dealt, and the default of the serial. After the first two sections, described above, there follow two figures of the poet. The “successful poet” (V Jupiter) who, just as Orpheus in Cocteau’s film is bored and spurned by the young poets at the *Café des poètes*, is spurned by young Bowering. And the sword-carrying valet (Page of Swords), who inhabits a complex of subordination, dandyism, scholarship, and fear. A long procession of masculine cards follows, until the tenth section where the absence of women is remarked on—“Are there no women / in this apparition? Or women / only disguised as these / bearded creatures?” The preceding cards are also full of anxiety about gender.

In the fifth section (XI Power or Strength), the tableau is described as being like an Italian epic film. This section enacts the model I did not find in the poem as a whole. “We,” an audience before the projected image, fantasize an omnipotent ideal, “feed our empty spines upon, / that nervous / extension of our dreams.” We wrestle with the lion, display our “strength” and “grace.” As the fantasy deepens, the audience dissolves, the “we” becomes “I,” and the gladiatorial struggle is described subjectively, not as a collective pleasure, but rather as single combat to the death, at which point the I assimilates the lion, his mane, his tongue, his single eye. The latter, the single eye “in my forehead,” is an artifact of how the lion is drawn, in profile, but also a mad extension of this innocent description, a fantasy of omniscience.

In section 6 (The Knight of Cups), the reader is being watched by an aggressive stranger, who offers him a poisoned drink. Such aggressions and deceptions continue in the following sections, until section 10 (King of Cups) where the masculine challenge is overcome: “He is a sad weakling / old monarch. He offers me no fright....” The cards that follow provide a more complex mixture of male, female, and topical emblems. In section 11, The Hanged Man (XII), the reader is “caught” in the image, hanging upside down, blood-filled head, all clarity of mind. This section gives way to The Sun (XVIII), a pastoral interlude in which a woman makes her first appearance since section 2. The sun fills the sky above two seated lovers, looks out directly at the reader. Like Paolo and Francesca, the lovers hold a book, but their eyes have turned to each other. Having abandoned “the light of reason,” there would seem to be no turning back. But, of course, this illumination must be followed by guilt (he was “a puritan lad, after all,” (Bowering,

How I Wrote 36). The Devil (XV) hovers over a woman sitting in “resolv’d anguish.” The anguish is the reader’s. He (she) hides his (her) face from the devil’s “cock.” As in the previous section, the reader is looking at the scene, a voyeur, but is also looked at. However, in this case, he denies but anticipates being seen—“She hasn’t yet seen me.” He thus attempts to reinforce his position outside the tableau, as the one looking rather than the one being seen.

The next card shows The House of God struck by lightning. Here the reader, the poet, in a horrifying inflation of the ego, assimilates himself to God, killing “what he makes / in order to make.” The equilibrium or simple majesty of the poet is re-established in section 15 (King of Clubs) and reinforced in section 16 (III The Emperor), where the male figure is invested rather than feared. The antagonist reappears in section 17 (Knight of Coins, or Pentacles). But now, and from here on, there is less fear, although still considerable anxiety before the accusatory other.

Temperance (XIII, section 18) is another strong woman, more like mother than lover. The Hermit (VIII, section 19) is a figure of wisdom and calm, an ideal. The lovers return in section 20, under the moon, above the cloistered emblem of a “primitive fighting beast” (a crab). This image is followed by the censuring Queen of Clubs. In section 22 (III The Empress) the reader announces the increasing appearance of the women. But the ambivalence, or narcissism, that subtends the poem is underlined again: “or are they as they would appear / only men in skirts & jewels?” As he says in section 8, “you know all along it’s myself / I’m talking about.” In section 21 and 22, he plays adroitly with subject and object, male and female. She is object, but “we” are subjected to her “by virtue of the force promist / by her readiness / to do violence” (21).

Section 23 deals up another king (King of Cups), but the anxiety remains diminished, “the fear made subtle.” The lovers appear again in section 24 (VI The Lovers). According to a pattern that by now seems unavoidable, the lovers’ brief encounter is followed by an avenger, The King of Swords, “the most martial, the most / powerful body of them all.” Section 26, the Page of Coins, reinforces the narcissistic position described above, a defensive strengthening of the ego. He looks into the mirror held by the page and sees: “flowering,” which is to say Bowering. And to make sure we don’t miss the function of this rhyme, it is repeated: “towering...overpowering...not glowering...flowering.” He is, alas, unafraid and secure: “What then of my fear?... // I am imagining all this // real as I can be.”

Juno (II) in section 27 is the “power woman,” frightening, and not desired; whereas The Queen of Coins in section 28, is “the sweetest young girl,” “shy,” “awkward,” and “the muscles beneath [his] skull // respond....” This card is followed, predictably, by the Queen of Cups (29), “again / demonic,” and then by Judgement (XX, 30). Judgement shows a winged trumpeter in the clouds, and four figures below, two men and two women, up to their thighs in mud and water. But the plea is one of not guilty based on several arguments going to the impossibility of a fair trial and, finally, to mistaken identity: it’s too early or too late; the judge “is not knowing enough”; the judge cannot understand me (“Who’s to judge? ... / Does this stranger / know the key I’ve always playd in?”); and besides I wasn’t even there (“None of them is I.”).

The major anxiety of the first few sections, which was largely expressed by an onslaught of warrior-like figures, has given way mostly to the female figures, and to those cards that represent aspects of the world: Judgement, The Wheel of Fortune, The World and Death. The only remaining male figures are The Chariot, The Fool, and the Page of Cups. The Chariot (VII), in section 31, shows a “man in [a] warlike crown,” but rather than a description of aggression, we get a meditation, a questioning. The question put to the oracle produces an oracular riddle. Similarly, in section 32, The Wheel of Fortune (X), the meditation produces answers, prescriptive aphorisms.

The next card is The Fool, *le Mat*, which could be translated as “the excuse” (Dummett). The Fool, with whom the reader clearly identifies, makes the hand signal which, at the time of the first Italian cards, was used to ward off the evil eye. But it’s not an aggressive gesture. “It’s all bullshit,” he seems to say. Here description fails the reader, he stumps himself, and names himself: “I’ve never known what to say about him, / try desperately as I may / toward this end, // fool.”

And then, in section 34, the World (XXI), another naked beauty, always there, always absent, forgotten, always coming back unexpectedly. She is vicious and happy. The Queen of Swords, in section 35 of the poem, is “a symbol of power and grace,” but “the sexiest yet.” However, he does not want this “symbol of woman,” he wants “that other naked one, the world.” In the following section, The Page of Cups, the reader has three teeth removed, again as a kind of *contrapasso*. He is offered a “giant cup / seen to be empty / or just ceremoniously fed with some unseen fluid,” clearly the spitting basin that used to stand beside the dentist’s chair.

He spits his teeth into the cup. “I’d give my eye teeth / to see where the cup is offered,” he concludes. Here a part of the body has been removed, presumably the wisdom teeth—the unmanning feared from the beginning—and, against “the light of reason” (12), counter to “the wisdom I desire” (24), he offers more, he offers his eyes, in order to see, in order to get behind the mirror, in order to know.

Section 37, Justice (VII), is retrospective. Justice is a woman. He “fear[s] her sword more than her scales.” He asks himself about the effects of the “deep drug”—the laughing gas of the previous section, but also, of course, love. He wonders what he has “opend / to her eyes,” to the eyes of Justice, with “these thirty seven pictures.” In this observation he draws to his own attention, with some discomfort, the fact that the poem is legible to anyone who can read.

The last section is Death (XIII, 38). Melodramatically, his last wish is for two minutes in which “to score / a power play goal.” Will this boy never learn? All he wants is to “score” one more time, “then fall forever to the ice,” beneath the cheers of “the lovely ladies, naked & robed & armored,” echoing in the halls of Dis.

Despite the narrative structure I’ve just outlined, when I say that there is no “narrative capture,” I mean that, strive as he does, the reader finds no comfort in the series, no origin, and no closure. The tree of the opening section comes after, not before the wooden club, as fantasy, imagined but entirely outside the image. This tree is like the lyric that has been banished from the serial, a utopian memory. The lyric is another severable object—this time the voice or tongue—that may be desired, but always under the threat of loss. In the end, the poet has “no lyric in [his] throat / to be cut away.” And in the ending, facing a death that must be a fiction because “after all it’s only others who die” (Duchamp, epitaph), the poet has nothing to say, just bows out with a bit of malarkey, like a fool, for love.

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