

Joshua Humphrey

As Poetry Recycles Neurons

Ta is for Tarot

In many traditions, the temple summarizes the creation of the universe (the cosmogeny) seen as a divine unit that has exploded into pieces. The Tarot can be seen as such a temple. Alejandro Jodorowsky calls it a nomadic cathedral, whose mirrors reflect the multifaceted nature of the soul. The Tarot is a mandala, with its own spatial orientation, architecture, and symbolic structure. It has been used as a tool of self-discovery for centuries. Through examining the history and symbolism of the Tarot, and by practicing the language of reflection in its mirrors, I seem insight into the complex, multidimensional nature of the unconscious. Perhaps it is only through the study of “beauty” that one may grasp the ineffable and the divine. The study of Tarot can therefore be undertaken as a study of “beauty”. In many ways, the plasticity and complexity of the Tarot reflects the nature of the human brain. If poetry is one way to recycle neurons, it occurs to me that Tarot must certainly be another; as it too is a language that begs for differential interpretations of its words. In *The Way of Tarot*, Jodorowsky writes, “You start with a pack of cards, you mix up the arcana and lay them flat, which is to say you cut god into pieces. You interpret them and put them back together in sentences. It is a sacred quest that the initiate reader must perform. God is resuscitated not in immaterial form, but in the material world.”

The Fool (Initiation/Sensing Boundaries)

The beginning is a void of boundless energy - the fundamental creative force. The first card in the Tarot, the only Major Arcana with no number, is the Fool, who represents the boundless energy of the initiate. The Tarot is a cosmogonic representation of the soul of man, the *anima mundi*, and the cosmos. The Tarot is split into two fundamental houses – The Major and Minor Arcana. The Major Arcana represent the transpersonal Archetypes of the unconscious, while the Minor Arcana represent the realm of the personal – emotion, intellect, intuition, and sensation. The Latin *Arcanum* means

mystery or secret body of knowledge. I have always thought of myself as a Mysterian, which is perhaps why I was initially attracted to the Tarot. My curiosity was one of boundless possibilities. In the beginning, I was the Fool. I remember the first time I really held a Tarot card. I was at once enchanted by its symbols. I had no idea what they meant, or whether or not they even had intrinsic meaning, but at the same time I knew they could lead the way to unlocking secret knowledge that is latent within each of us. When I shuffled through the cards, I was flooded by lost memories, emotions, elations, and insights. The cards each had their own character, their own signature, and when analyzed, seemed to unlock the morphogenetic code of our collective memory. First encounters are fundamental to understanding ones point of evolution - their blockages, or to reframe this in a positively affirming way, their growing edges. Jodorowsky comments on first encounters/initiations into this world of esoteric knowledge,

"Some images may inspire sympathy or revulsion, joy or fear. These reactions arise from our education and personal history: the Tarot is a powerful projectile tool in which our gaze will identify already known models, which will initially cause us to react in accordance with habitual behavior patterns." (Jodorowsky pp. 33).

At first, I never bothered to ask myself why i was so magnetized to the cards. I reveled in the satisfaction that I had found a tool through which I might gain greater understanding myself. I was fascinated by the fact that I could carry around an entire universe in my pocket. To me, each card was as a *clavis universalis* to the depths of my being. The Tarot is a language, a collective memory bank of sorts, which reflects the nature of the unconscious. The cards can be arranged in infinitely complex combinations, like the words that make up a sentence. Much in the same way that myths and dreams act as mediators between signs and signified, the arcana of the Tarot allow us to tap into the sensorial roots of our experience. In his book, *Creative Processes in Gestalt Therapy*, Joseph Zinker addresses the

nature of symbols and language, and the resulting disconnection that occurs when we forget the phenomenological root of our experience,

"Generally speaking, we forget that our language has sensorial roots, that our words stem from concrete experiences. We treat words as if they themselves were the experience. The pedantic (or casual) manipulation of concepts and abstractions can remove us from the immediate impact of our reality. To be sensorially in contact is difficult in an increasingly automated world in which we are constantly distracted by static." (Zinker pp. 79)

The Magician (Transversal Communication)

When I become lost in reverie with the cards, I merge with them. Suddenly, I am no longer in a universe of causal relations, but instead a universe where the temporal and the spatial are independent, much like that of a dream. When I gaze into the cards I can see past, present and future as concurrent realities, which are all coalescing and spreading out like a fan of infinite possibilities. With the Tarot I am both the interpretant and the interpreter; I am both reading and being read in a reflexive feedback, a dialogue. Each time I spread the cards, I enter into a sacred space, a universe perfused with signs. I envision myself sitting at the banks of a great river, where all possible permutations intersect in a collective pool that is the unconscious. When arranged, the arcana provide a map, a memory-scape of the collective unconscious. In learning to read this map, I have come to understand that signs point to something greater than themselves. The images are but mediators, that is, transversal communicators between the "inner" and "outer" realms. This is embodied by the role of The Magician in the world – the mediator. So in a way, each card and each symbol is magical, because they can bridge the gap between subjective and objective experience. All archetypes exist *in potentia* only; it is the finite sign that points to the multitudinous array of possibilities that exist within the unconscious,

"The plurality of evolving meanings finds their expressions in the symbols of transformation: a symbol 'points beyond itself to a meaning that is... still beyond our grasp, and cannot be adequately expressed in the familiar words of our language' but needs a medium or representation - like tarot pictures - for its very expression. (Semetsky pp.53)

The tarot is a system that can be understood through dialogue, both intra- and interpersonal. To become versed in its language, one must become versed in the language of magic. I began by studying the cultural and historical context of the origins of the Tarot. Medieval and Renaissance Europe was the alchemical birthplace of the Tarot. Understanding the fundamental workings of Alchemy, or the art of "Black Earth", is important to understanding the symbolic architecture of the cards. Science and magic were once synonymous; they share the same birthplace - the imagination. The Medieval and Renaissance alchemists were distilling consciousness and projecting its qualities on the external world. In my readings on alchemy and the art of memory, I slowly became aware of the primacy of language. Today, we are capable of doing many things that by any standards of that time would have been considered alchemical feats of Divine proportion. When I become lost in the world of the alchemist, I am aware of the artful language that comprises his repertoire. When alchemy split into polar world-views, those of art and science, or magic and science, there was a shift rhetoric that gave birth to a new era of "cold" empirical science. It seemed to have lost its poetic language. With modern science, we are doing exactly what the alchemists were trying to do but without the magico-poetic rhetoric, the language that transformed the laboratory experiment into the work of the divine. Perhaps, my attraction to the Tarot was a product of my desire to connect with my poetic self. I desired to be able to speak the language of the Magician, who rectifies the seemingly disparate fields of art and science. The Magician is the communicator between objective and subjective experience, between the inner and the outer. In the Tarot, he is the first numbered card, and he points to both the heavens and the earth as if to affirm the alchemist's credo, "As above so below". In my studies on the Tarot, alchemy, mythology, and poetry I

began to see a thread - what Mircea Eliade calls the “sexualization” of nature. All of my studies and experience seem to point to the androgynous nature of the soul or psyche. Through poetry, science and art we can open a dialogue between the two “gendered” complementary components of androgynous thought - the *anima* and the *animus*. This dialogue is what Gaston Bachelard calls the *anima-animus* dialectic. Language itself is sexualized; our words and sentences all form heirogamies whose sexual union is the birth of thought. The return to androgeneity is the driving force, the maxim that propels the evolution of consciousness and the process of individuation. Carl Jung believed that contact with the *anima/animus* was fundamental for path to individuation.



Figure 1 -The Magician of the Marseilles and Hermetic Tarot

The Tarot was built upon a language of numbers. It arose out of a culture whose number system was a base ten number system - the decimal system. By exploring the archetypal nature of these numbers, the character of each card starts to emerge. One is the whole, which is the beginning of a cycle, and ten is complete realization – the end of one cycle and the beginning of another. They are dual aspects of the same force: the alpha and omega or void and substance of the Tarot. In order to understand this number system, it is helpful to develop a visual map of the progression of the cards. The numbers of the tarot correspond to masculine and feminine qualities, or as Jodorowsky calls them, "active" and "receptive" qualities (odd being active and even being receptive). The numerical progression from two to eight forms three squares, those of Heaven and Earth, and where the two intersect lays the realm of man. The realm of man, an intersection of Heaven and Earth, is where the Soul ascends and the Spirit descends. This Union can be seen in the card of the Magician, who is a bridge between the gap of art and science. Here I have juxtaposed two passages from my readings that I think illustrate The Magician's function nicely.

"The magician's transversal communication crosses over the dualistic gap between mind and matter, science and magic, process and structure, the world without and the world within, subject and object, human experience and the natural world, therefore establishing the likeness equivalent to the Hermetic formula..." (Semetsky pp. 326)

"The art of memory, therefore, was a way of establishing correspondences between the microcosm of the mind's images and the macrocosm of the ideal universe, which were believed to be congruent structures. In such a conception, the role of the mnemonist took on added importance. Not only did he practice a skill, but he also assumed a priestly status as an interpreter of the nature of reality. (Hutton pp. 375)

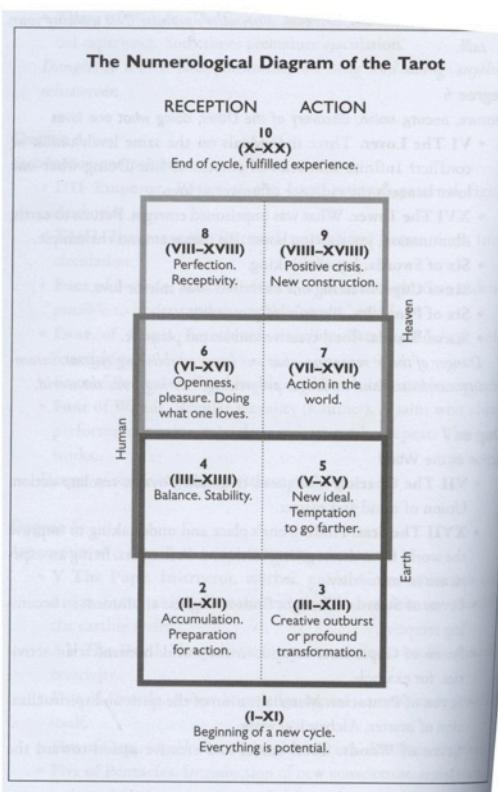


Figure 2 - A Map of the Numerical Progression of the Tarot (The Way of the Tarot pp. 82)

The Moon (The Unconscious)

A perfect allegory for the birth and expansion of consciousness and the correlative numerical progression of the cards is the Gnostic creation mythos. In this tradition, there are angelic entities called Aeons. Each Aeon is in the form of a syzygy; two divine complementary halves. The first Aeon was called Ennoea, who was split into two; its twin was Nuos. Nuos became sick and flawed and was cast out, to the material world, to Earth. Here she was received as Sophia (wisdom) one of the feminine archetypes

of the God-Head or the Spirit in material form. Sophia, in the material, is always trying to return to the immaterial, to Ennoea. This illustrates so poetically the cycles of birth and death that lie nested within every moment, every being and every thought. The numbers each correspond to points of human evolution and to the evolution of the cosmos. As we progress through them, new points of evolution are born in the death of old ones. It is highly important to understand the cyclical nature of the numbers of the Tarot to understand its symbolism. Once of my poems, *The Syzygy*, was inspired in part by the Gnostic Fall. I was caught in a daydream when reading the cards when it came to me. In this poem I am sitting on the banks of a timeless river. Here I muse on the artist (the creative force) who has painted a river in my mind, a river of thoughts and images where I can tap into the timeless myths that were born of the collective unconscious. Here, an infinite well-spring of secret knowledge is at my fingertips. This poem is full of nested images, where each image materializes inside the next, just as in the number cycles of the tarot (where each cycle engenders the next). In a way, this poem is an allegorical Uruburus - a snake eating its own tail.

The Syzygy

A braided river runs through the secret garden of my mind.

Whose hand dost paint this river?

It's banks, by which The Aeons come and go, are muddy and fertile.

This is the Art of Black Soil,

Black Earth.

From a pinpoint drop of her blood

(blood of water, blood of wine)

A wellspring flows unbridled.

Arcane knowledge explodes in all directions.

Arcanum – tomb of secret knowledge,
Whose whispering images speak paintings,
Stroke by stroke,
Upon my mind.

Here you will find Archangel Raphael and Azazel
(The Watcher who, bound hand and foot, was cast into darkness forever);
Mercury , son of Maia and Jupiter, reconciler of all opposites;
The Word Dreamer, Surrogate-Nurse of all things Material;
The Poet Ennoea, lost in reverie.

Ennoea beget Nous;
A Cosmic pair – Lovers, Siblings, Mother, Father.
The Syzygy (Ultimate Androgyne),
At once an infinitesimal dot and omnidirectional, infinitely vast plane
(through which my braided river runs)
Is both Source and Destiny.

Alas, this Divine Zygote has cut itself into pieces;
Nous – flawed, sick and insane,
Bit and clawed at the underbelly of her beloved twin.
Spit out like the poison from a wound,
She fell to Earth, to Black Soil;
The Logos – The Word,
The Immaterial Manifest.

To truly converse with the cards, I had to engage with my unconscious through poetry and through the art of word dreaming. I decided that I must commune with it by familiarizing myself with the mythic imagery of the archetypes, not through the *logos* mind or analytical thinking. Communication with the unconscious is done largely at the sensate level, it is a phenomenological experience. The senses are then transmuted by the conscious mind into a language that it understands. This is done through metaphor and allegory, through art and poetry.

"I am the beginning where all deep knowledge begins, when you immerse yourself in my silent waters without asking a thing, without trying to define anything, when you stand outside all light. The more you enter me, the greater your attraction to me. I am bottomless and all nuance, I extend ion the realm of the shadow." (Jodorowsky pp. 239)

In order to open my sensorial imagination, I had to open myself to my Anima, to the Moon or the Goddess, who is a symbol of the unconscious. Tarot is a conduit for direct experiential knowledge or *gnosis* of the unconscious. In many ways, the nature of hidden or esoteric knowledge is represented by La Lune, or the Moon. It is the moon that represents the *anima*, it is the moon who has power over the tides of our emotion, over our very being.

The World (A Portrayal/Unity of the Organism)

Jodorowsky proposes that in order to understand the individual parts of the Tarot, it must be first understood as a whole unto itself. The Tarot, when organized by its numerical progression, forms a mandala or a temple that represents the creation of the universe. Its spiraling arms create a swastika, which is a mythic symbol that represents Shakti or the creative driving force of the cosmos. I used this mandala as the basis for a poem called Le M[onde]at. The title of the poem contains the *alpha* and *omega* of the Tarot – The Fool and the World. There is a vertical axis emanating from the center, which I recognize as the *axis mundi* or world pillar – the navel center and umbilical of the Mother Goddess

(Gaia). Le M[onde]at is written in the French of the Tarot of Marseilles. The numbers and headers are in Latin. If one looks closely, they will notice that the roman numerals are progressive; they never contain a regression or subtraction from the following number. This represents the constant progression of the cycles of the Tarot. At the bottom, I have added a key of sorts - The Major Arcanum or Greater Mystery.



Figure 3 - Le M[onde]at

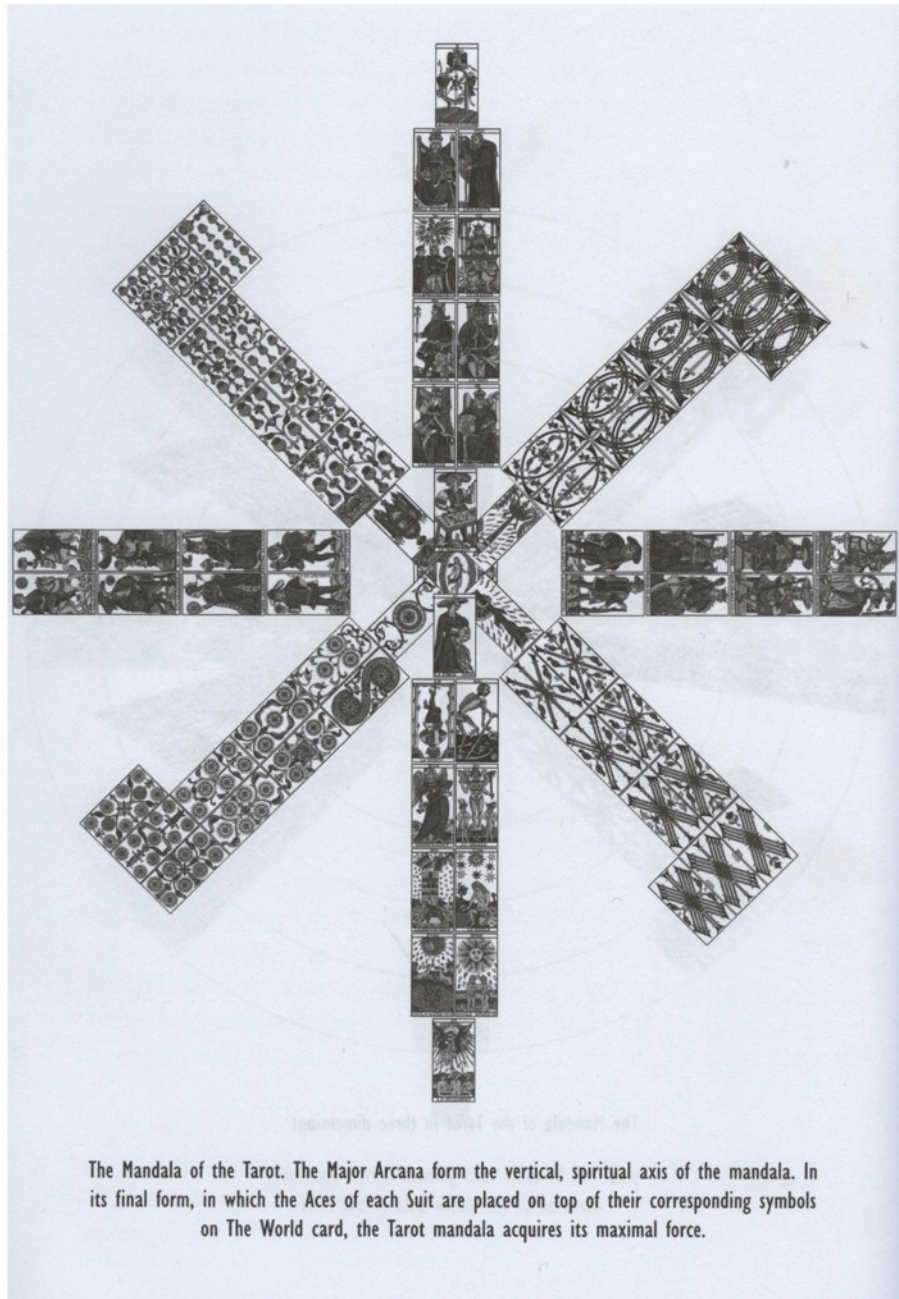


Figure 4 - Tarot of Marseille Mandala (The Way of Tarot pp 145)

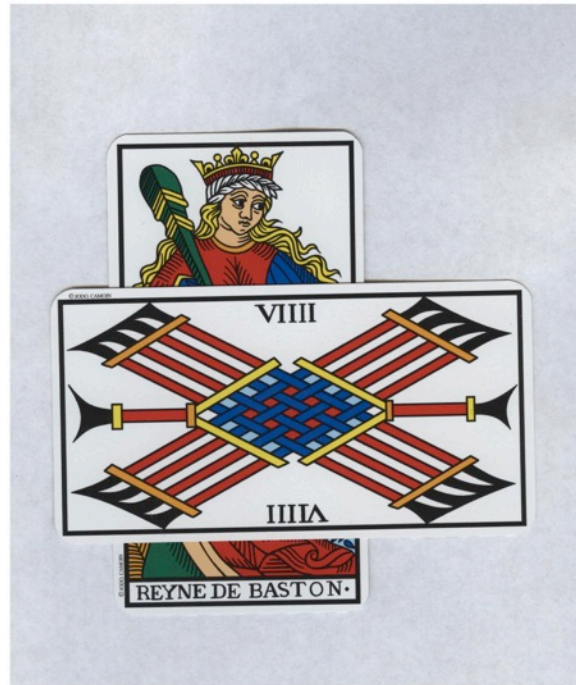


Figure 5 - Two Card Spread with Reyne De Baston and the nine of wands

The queen of wands is a sensual and seductive card. She represents an individual in full control of their sexual (creative) capacity. She evokes the satisfaction of a person who has begun to live on her own creativity. In a negative sense, she could be someone who is obsessed with sex, vanity, or excess. The nine of wands is the conflict or obstacle card. It represents an individual confronted by life or death (metaphorically), someone who is on the edge of a precipice. It is the experience of the symbolic end of the ego. The nines correspond to the energies of the Hermit and the Sun. Together, these two cards can

signify the end of one cycle and the beginning of another. This person is in crisis, which is also a state of opportunity. Here, all superfluous decorations must be eliminated in order to evolve into a powerfully creative force in the world.



Figure 6 - The Strength card of the Marseilles and Rider-Waite Tarot

Here we see La Force or Strength in both the Raider-Waite and the Tarot De Merseilles formations. The woman is donning a hat that looks much like the lemniscate, or infinity symbol that appears over the head of the figure in Rider-Waite version.

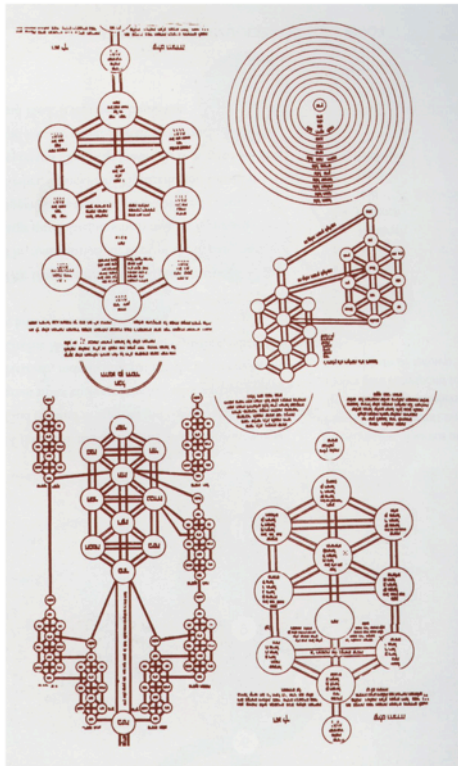


Figure 7 - The Kabbhalic Tree of Life

The base ten of the Tarot correspond to the ten Sephira of the Tree of Life. Every node of every Sephira is connected to every other Sephira in an array of complex combinations. Different combinations hint at different realities, together they form a whole. The numerical progression of a

layout of cards can indicate a progression, regression, or stagnation of consciousness. I have compared any blockages with the possible breakpoints in the contact–awareness cycle of Gestalt therapy, which allow for a visual representation of repression or stagnation of certain elements of one’s being.

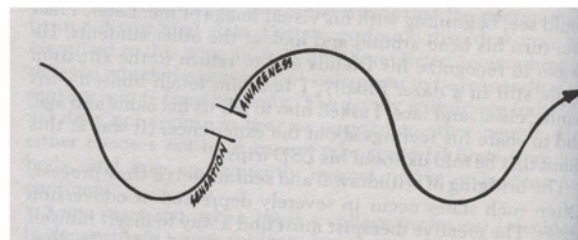
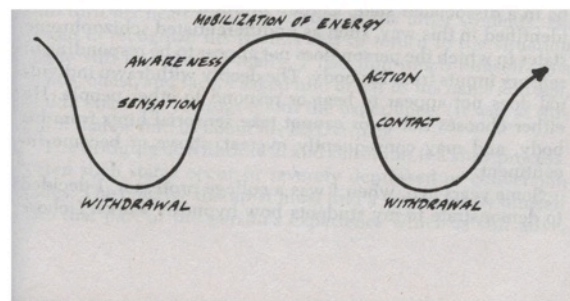


Figure 8 - Contact-Awareness Cycle and possible break points (Creative Processes in Gestalt Therapy)

There are endless ways to cut up the Tarot and put it back together. Each spread serves a different function, like the one below which is called an “alchemical spread”. Sometimes the axis represent the passage of time, fragmentation of a soul, or even the physical structure of the matter around us. As with concrete poetry, the form often contains as much information if not sometimes more than the content. The plasticity of the Tarot is evident in its multi-functionality. In the alchemical spread, the aces of each suit are laid horizontally. Each suit represents one pole of the quadra-polar personality type diagram: swords – air – thinking, wands – fire – intuiting, pentacles – earth – sensing, and cups – water – feeling. The arcana laid on bottom represent the earthly realm, while those laid on top are the heavenly.



Figure 9 - An Alchemical Spread: "As above, so below"

The Tower (Contact with the Spirit of the Cards)

One of the most profound experiences I had while immersed in my study of Tarot, was the occurrence of three successive dreams in which I had clear archetypal imagery directly relating to Tarot cards. After I had these dreams, I began to study closely the meaning and symbolism of their correlative cards. To further integrate what I had experienced in the dream state, I decided to write a poem called The Tower. The Tower is composed of three stanzas, each relating to a Tarot card. The number of words in each stanza relates to the number of the Arcana on each card. The Tower progresses from top to bottom, in numerical order. In a way, The Tower represents the construction of a soul. These three stanzas correspond to the three dreams in which I found clear Tarot symbolism. The first was the Devil. Le Diable, who sits atop a throne with two imps chained at its side, is the androgynous creature who dwells in the depths of the unconscious. He was once an angel, and now bears the torch of light, or consciousness, with which he wishes to return to the surface of awareness. The Devil can point to temptation, passion, taboo, fear, and sexuality (creativity). The tower immediately follows the Devil in the Tarot of Marseilles. Many refer to it as the tower of Babel, but here, instead of pointing to catastrophe, the tower represents construction and the celebration of the divine in the form of flesh - the earthly temple. It can symbolize opening, celebration, overflowing, construction, and shock. The next card is the Judgment. Here we see the birth of Consciousness, where all of the Tarot's energy has been focused and distilled. The aspects of masculine (active) and feminine (receptive) are in the presence of an angel (Seraph) who blows and angelic trumpet, announcing the birth or resurrection of Consciousness. There is a fiery angel in the heavenly realm of sky. After a journey through the dark depths of the unconscious (in the shadows), a new life is born, an immaterial and immortal

Consciousness. The angel announces this awakening with music, the music of the Divine. Here, the Judgment can symbolize birth, vocation, consciousness, work, union, transcendence, and music.

The Tower

THE CLOUDS
BREAK; I AM
RESURRECTED
BY MY EYES.
OPEN, SEAL AND
SKY, REMIND ME
OF THE FACE
OF GOD

TREMORS ROCK
THIS LIVING
TEMPLE - THIS
CONDUIT. THE
EARTH SHIVERS
IN A MOMENT
OF SUPREME
U N I O N

T E M P T R I X !
LORD AND
LADY AT THE
GATES OF
MATTER, ILLU-
MINATE THIS
O B S Y D I A N
LABYRINTH -
PRIMORDIAL
N I G H T



Figure 10 - Tarot Dream Cards

Dream Analysis

Le Diable – I awoke and realized that I was at my parents' house in Texas. I was talking with my stepfather in the yard when he grabbed my arm and stared intensely into my eyes. Almost immediately I was paralyzed; I felt a transfer of strange and powerful energy that eventually overtook me. This energy spoke to me and I knew at once that he was no longer my step-father, whose vessel was all that was left, but the spirit of The Devil. It was simultaneously frightening and ecstatic to feel what he felt – to feel my thoughts and emotions entraining with his energetic signature. I became an extension of the fallen angel. I was scared of some truth that might bring me great power and great pleasure. The sensation became so overwhelming that it actually woke me from my sleep. I sat up in the darkness of my room, and felt tingles run down my spine. It was then that I realized I had made first contact with the spirit of a Tarot card.

Le Maison Dieu – In this dream, several close friends and I were being pursued by a horde of people. Somehow it was clear to me that they were not truly human, but the stone simulacra of some great wizard or necromancer. They were a horde of golem, whose sole purpose was to capture and return us to their master. The pursuit led to a tall skyscraper. My friends and I were forced upward, slowly, until we had to climb out of a maintenance shaft at the top of the building. We decided to climb the scaffolding surrounding the outside of the building. It was night, and the wind was blowing, causing the scaffolding to bow. I was scared, as I looked hundreds of feet down, so I decided to look up at the sky to calm my nerves.

Le Jugement – I found myself participating in a culinary competition that was being hosted at the college. My good friend was my cooking partner. We were struggling to finish the meals in time when he began berating me. He became increasingly erratic and confrontational as he pulled the food out of the oven. It was green and goey, and smelled of rotten flesh. A past teacher of mine was the judge of the

contest. I approached the judge's table with my abomination in hand, all the while being followed and harassed by my partner. My teacher looked down with a strange look of satisfaction in his eyes.

"I made a vow to myself never to give advice, but to structure the reading in such a way that the solution comes to the person. To manage this, I relied on my study of dream analysis: the psychoanalyst should not explain to his patient the meaning of oneiric symbols. This amounts to playing the role of father-mother and plunging the patient into a persistent childhood. The patient should personally penetrate the messages his subconscious sends him. The analyst can present different solutions. The individual should choose the path that best suits him." (Jodorowsky pp. 427)

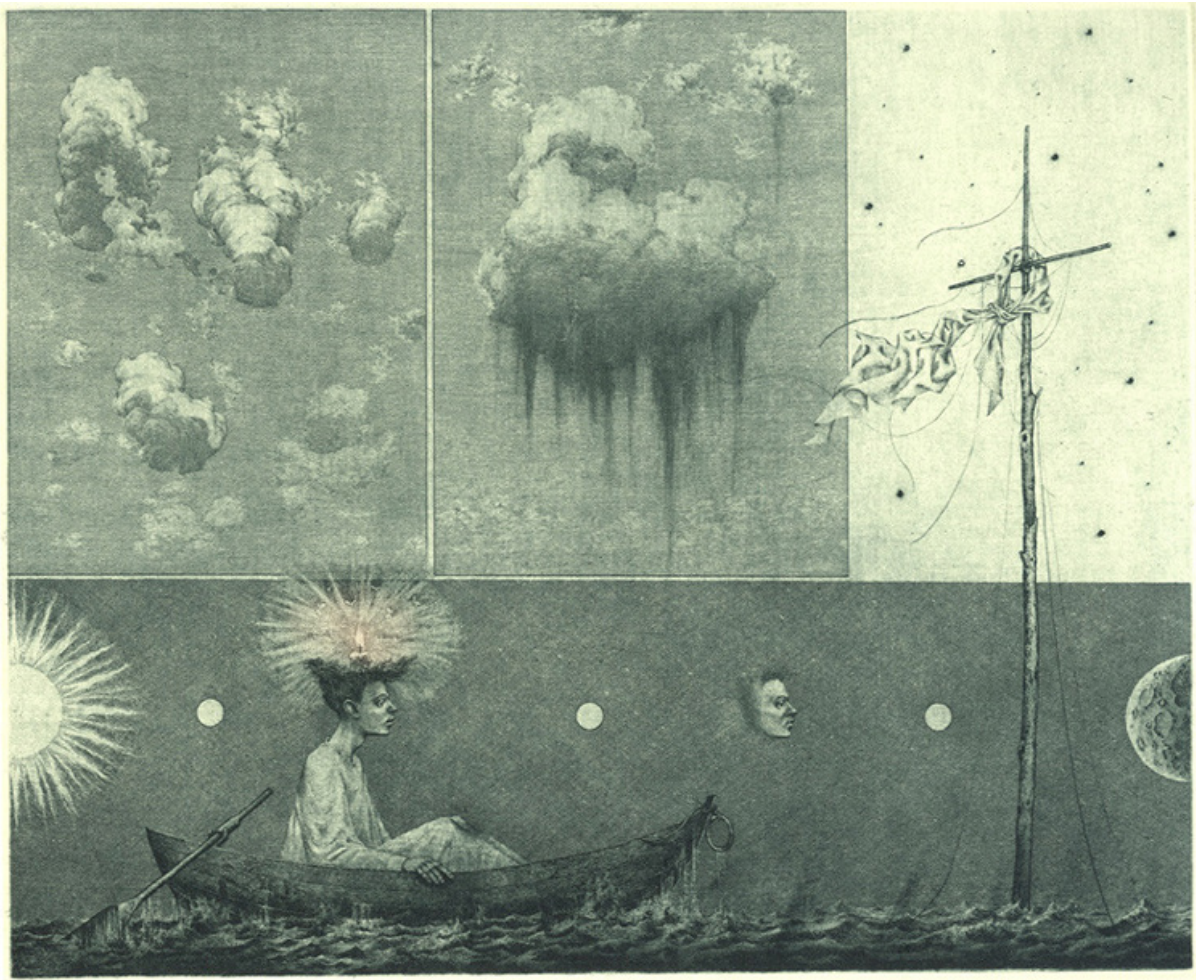


Figure 11 - Museum of Clouds, butdoesitfloat.com

Upon analysis of the cards and their symbolism, the message of my dreams became much clearer to me. A few weeks before the dreams, I performed one of my first musical performances in the Seattle under the moniker Seraphim. The name Seraphim also came to me in a dream, years ago, when a fiery creature began speaking to me in an angelic language. She told me that she was one of the Seraphim, who sit at the throne of God, announcing his glory to all. This dream stuck with me so much that I decided to take it for myself. At the top of the Judgment card there is a fiery angel who announces the birth of a higher consciousness with the music of the divine, the music of the Seraphim. The Devil in the form of my father represents some great and powerful knowledge that I refused to confront, but could actually benefit from by facing. After the performance in Seattle, I was feeling a bit disillusioned and self-depreciative about my work. The friend who is my partner in the Judgment dream also happens to be the owner of the label I had released on, and his constant bickering and the stressful environment created by his energy reminded me of that of the dream. In the Tower, I was swaying delicately atop a great structure, something I had worked hard to construct. I am scared as I look down from those dizzying heights. In a moment, I realized that if I just look up towards the heavens, I can make contact with the Divine. After cross-referencing the different dream elements I was overcome by a sense of synchronicity. It was as if my dream self or past self was trying to send me messages of support.

The Wheel of Fortune (How Tarot Recycles Neurons)

Just as poetry recycles neurons, so too does the language of archetypal images that is the Tarot. Its plasticity is like that of the neuronal pathways of the brain, which has more possible connections than the atoms in this universe. The poetics of alchemy, magic, and the archetypes of the unconscious have begun to slowly transform how I read the world around me. I now read people as if they are arcana of the Tarot. Each person holds within themselves a great and powerful mystery. I feel as though I have

passed through the initiation of the Fool into the phase of the Magician. I feel that I am learning to control the elements of my psyche, in this great experiment of life. Cycles of death and rebirth are nested in every moment, and through the reflection of the cards, I am reminded that I am master of my own internal universe. Jodorowsky speaks beautifully to the birth of a new consciousness, a magico-poetic consciousness, which the Tarot can facilitate.

"I have learned full well that everything that begins will end, and all that ends, begins. I have learned full well that everything that goes up must come down and that everything that comes down must go up. I have learned full well that everything in circulation will stagnate and all that stagnates will begin circulating. Poverty becomes wealth, and wealth, poverty. From one change to another I invite you to unite with the wheel of life, accepting changes with patience, docility, and humility until the moment Consciousness is born. Then all that is human, like a chrysalis, will attain the angelic stage where reality ceases revolving around itself, where it soars off into the mind of the Creator." (Jodorowsky pp. 185)



Figure 12 - Bestiarius Apocalypsi Autumn, butdoesitfloat.com