

CHANCE & THE RANDOM: TOOLS TO ENERGISE THE IMAGINATION

by Penelope Shuttle

We have all experienced the blind panic that can overcome us when we confront the blank page or screen. However, it has also wisely been said that if we come to the blank page it is because we have something to offer it. The painter Paula Rego has pointed out the importance of the 'play' element in her work. In poetry we can benefit enormously from 'playing with language', of taking our imagination by surprise, when it and we are off-guard. Playing with language permits us to relax our hold on imagination and memory; it lessens the pressure to produce a finished or a draft poem and we are more likely to catch that 'peripheral vision'. This sense of play can also spare us from a too-early intervention from the personal critic who often sits frowning and muttering on our writing shoulder.

Chance and 'the random' take us to unpredictable places and enable different narratives. Working with chance allows the writer to challenge her/his unconscious assumptions about what a poem 'should be'; it also challenges the reader's unconscious assumptions. Chance leads to surprise, to revelation, to the challenge of paradox, to the springs of the imagination; it facilitates ways of finding subject, atmosphere and voice, and of fully realising the imagination into life. Using random prompts helps to break down the chaos of possibility into 'bite-size pieces', and will certainly cure that fear of the blank page. As we relax into language we enter the magic of the poem, the realm of transformative experience where we engage with an imagination both boundless and yet at home in its skin. Our desire to be in control of language is natural, and vital in later drafting stages of the poem, but initial letting-go is also a discipline. So how to begin?

'We gambled with images and there were no losers' says Paul Éluard. I invite you to gamble with images. Here is a list of questions. I would like you to answer them. However, I don't want correct answers, I want imaginary answers. Write as much as you can. How wonderful and liberating it is not to know the answer, but to invent it. From your imaginary answers, poems will insist on being written. And as you write, remember these words of Picasso: '... I found what I wasn't looking for ...' and these of Jean Cocteau: '... a poem is a lie that tells the truth'.

Bonne Chance, mes amis, mes poètes!

THE QUESTIONS

- Name the three occasions on which the composer Rossini is known to have wept. Write in detail about these occasions.
- Who said 'Museums are rubbish?' Explain why.
- Whose physician treated her/him by tying dead pigeons to her/his feet? Why?
- How can you tell when a fox and a vixen are getting married? Describe the wedding.
- Who invented the parachute while serving a prison sentence? Describe the childhood of the inventor.
- In the numerical system of the Institut Bibliographique in Brussels, what number corresponds to God? Why?
- What is a 'snottite'? Write a description as if you were giving a lecture on this subject to a group of skate-boarders.
- What is a 'blind alley'?
- Name the coldest city in Spain. Write a description of a January you once spent there.
- What is the best cure for chilblains? Present your research findings.

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