

## Tangential Surrealism

The word Surrealism was coined in the summer of 1917 by the poet Guillaume Apollinaire. One of the participants of this anthology Lee Ballentine described Surrealism as a “revolution in the form of method.” The art historian Dickran Tashjian inadvertently suggested the term Tangential Surrealism in his 1995 book *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-garde: 1920-1950*, where he wrote about editors who “sought cultural goals that were sometimes derived from, sometimes at odds with, sometimes tangential to, Breton’s surrealism,” so their magazines became platforms for their own “cultural agendas”. This term seems to have taken root.

Irish poet Ciaran O’Driscoll once stated in *Cyphers* 95 that “tangential surrealists are poets whose work connects with core Surrealism somewhat further than the extent to which a straight line connects with a circle.” Are we, surrealist poets of different trends, really that different? Will Alexander wrote the following in one of his essays: “For me, language, by its very operation, is alchemical, mesmeric, total in the way that it condenses and at the same time proves capable of leaping the boundaries of genre.”

Is Tangential Surrealism a literary movement? A system? A school of writing? Or, in the words of Maurice Blanchot, a “pure practice of existence”? It obviously exists in the field of inquiry, but does it defy understanding? Genres have to be defined. As we see it, Tangential Surrealism is about writing poems through wonder, intuition, and surprising connections. If the original surrealists of the 1930s sought to unleash the unconscious mind by bringing elements of dreams to the waking world with jarring juxtapositions, tangential poetry is more about transmutation, or associative leaps, from word to word, from phrase to phrase, and from image to image. Associative logic makes poetic leaps in imagination and mood that happen, as Robert Bly noted, “when no one is watching,” i.e. when the poet’s thought is up in the air, between the moment the leap started and the moment the thought reaches the place it leaps to.

Bly used the term “Leaping Poetry” to refer to surrealist and magic realist influenced works. His 1975 book *Leaping Poetry: An Idea with Poems and Translations* was a collection of essays, but the “idea”

referred to in the title was about "long leaping associations" in modern poetry and drew from a range of works by international poets. Carl Phillips writes about discontinuity when he refers to this trend as "poetry that works almost entirely by means of association—no connecting narrative pieces, often no syntactical connection, poetry that is characterized by leaps not just from stanza to stanza, but from one image to the next in ways that do not immediately make sense..."

This applies to tangential surrealist poetry to a great extent. Charles Borkhuis once remarked that "Tangential Surrealism also intensifies a linguistic or textual examination of its processes. It is not unlike waking up inside a dream that is more real than reality itself—an altered reality that is both strangely familiar and irresistibly unique. One that carries critical thought with it as it leaps over the abyss on disappearing steps... hybrids are being created, which may be considered tangential to surrealism, but may be personal to individual poets and not fall into any particular collective."

Every one of Tangential Surrealists has his own bit of poetic predisposition, or ancestry. Some of them, notably Andrew Joron, Garrett Caples, Charles Borkhuis, George Kalamaras, Andrew Zawacki, and Jeffrey Cyphers Wright, draw on the textual emphasis of language poetry bridging the gap between Surrealist and language poetry; their language-conscious Surrealism can be described as, quoting the title of an essay by Charles Borkhuis, "writing from inside the language." Some others, like Jerome Rothenberg, Robert Kelly, John Godfrey, and Diane Wakoski, as well as the late Mark Strand and Clayton Eshleman, display a strong connection to Deep Image poetry, whereas Noelle Kocot seems to be heavily influenced by the poetry of Confessionalism, exploring such a connection in her deeply-felt lyrical writing, the kind that Charles Borkhuis identifies as the "critical lyric". John Yau's interest in gnosticism and mysticism makes his tangential Surrealism unique, too. Will Alexander, Matthew Rohrer, Andrei Codrescu, Helen Ivory, Joshua Marie Wilkinson, Lee Ballentine, Michael Leong, Marc Vincenz, as well as the late Bill Knott, James Tate and Dean Young, develop(ed) their own kinds of "tangential storytelling." Despite these individual differences all these poets are true surrealists in every meaning of this word. Tangential Surrealism is inclusive and, to a certain degree, elastic.

This book also showcases a number of non-American surrealists working in this genre, like Helen Ivory and Alison Dunhill of England, Angela Cleland of Scotland, Medbh McGuckian of Northern Ireland, Les Wicks and Peter Hammill of Australia, Chris Price and Michele Leggott of New Zealand, and KB Nelson of Canada. Surrealism may be international in scope, but in the English-speaking countries other than the USA, Australia and, to a lesser degree, Canada it doesn't have a particularly widespread influence on contemporary writing. Quoting Alicia Ostriker, "surrealism persuades us that its world is arbitrary and questionable" (qtd. in Gillian White, *Lyric Shame* 127). Unfortunately, some poetry associations, arts authorities, and publishing companies, especially in the English-speaking European countries, have extended this approach to the border of the absurd, sometimes viewing the whole Surrealism movement and, wider, any experimental writing as a questionable, or even a dangerous trend. Such mindless conformity with the mainstream status quo is as saddening as it is maddening and as ridiculous as it is futile. After all, who has the capacity to stop the development of poetry on any "God's little acre"? "It is impossible to write today as though Surrealism never existed," Jean-François Bory remarked. Well, in Francophone countries they do know it!

"After the war we witness the death of language as it was known," Henri Chopin once wrote, but the truth is that the language is always alive, even if poetry is hardly so. Lettrism and other attempts to dismantle words, which are the core of a language, didn't really take root, even though they heavily influenced visual poetry and contributed to its development. Every new generation of poets has to learn afresh how to use the language in innovative, unexpected ways, and they always succeed in doing that. Guided by their surrealist imagination, they tend to go deeper and wider, to explore the horizons of ambience.

We didn't include any translated work in this book – with one exception: we believed that poems by the Ukrainian writer and artist Julia Stakhivska deserve to be in it. Julia is not the only poet belonging to the younger generation of surrealists: we also introduce such accomplished authors as Clayre Benzádon, Lily Brown, Charles Kell, Jon Riccio, Jake Sheff, and Pamela Yannakakis.

Surrealism has seen many revivals since André Breton's first manifesto of 1924. Its new revival is more or less recent: the

International Society for the Study of Surrealism was established in 2018; it attempts, quoting their mission statement, to “integrate the field of Surrealism studies worldwide by organizing events and managing channels of information that facilitate cross-disciplinary and inter-regional communication and exchange.” In 2022, *Contemporary Surrealist and Magic Realist Poetry* anthology edited by Jonas Zdanys was published by Lamar University Press in Texas, USA. It was an important achievement in researching the possible surrealist practices across the globe. In the future, further steps can – and should – be taken in anthologising different trends of contemporary Surrealist writing. This particular anthology is an attempt to gather together the poets whose Tangential Surrealism, we believe, deserves an exploratory look.

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*Dublin, Ireland, August 2023*