

Willard Bohn (ed.), *Surrealist Poetry: An Anthology*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2017. ISBN 9781441199775.

Reviewed by Gavin Yates

In his Introduction to *Surrealist Poetry*, Willard Bohn begins by quoting Anna Balakian's resounding statement that surrealism is "the major poetic and artistic current of the twentieth century" (1). Surrealism is recognised not only for developing such radical artistic expression, but also for its vastly ambitious stance as a movement that once claimed, through the "omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought," to possess the ability to "destroy all other psychic mechanisms" and "take their place in resolving the principal problems of life" (3). This proclamation from the *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924) is indicative of André Breton's revolutionary approach to poetry and to life—an impetus that remains critical for surrealism in all its manifestations.

Breton's first *Surrealist Manifesto* was the movement's official inception, but its initial articulation can be attributed to the collaborative text *Les Champs magnétiques* (1919) by Philippe Soupault and Breton himself—a written experiment that explores the function of thought through the automatic invocation of language. Since then, surrealism has been waging revolutionary attitudes and practices against poetic formalism on a global scale.

Almost a century later, Bohn's bilingual anthology is testimony of surrealism's longstanding significance. Distinguished Professor Emeritus of French and Comparative Literature and author of *Marvelous Encounters: Surrealist Responses to Film, Art, Poetry, and Architecture* (2005) and *The Rise of Surrealism* (2002), Bohn is the editor and translator of an anthology of remarkable achievement.



Surrealist Poetry is an authoritative starting point for the unacquainted: a generous selection from twenty-three poets writing in French and Spanish from countries as diverse as Belgium, Martinique, Mauritius, Mexico, Chile, and Peru. The volume includes those responsible for surrealism's turbulent efflorescence: from the French founders Louis Aragon, André Breton, Paul Éluard, and Philippe Soupault, to the international dissemination of their system inherited as such by the leading Spanish-language models of Vicente Aleixandre, Federico García Lorca, Pablo Neruda, and Octavio Paz.

The anthology's alphabetical structure is intended to undermine any language-based division: Bohn's aim is to foreground the practice of surrealism itself and to introduce its style to an unfamiliar Anglophonic readership. His introduction provides a general overview that is informative and succinct—no easy task considering surrealism's complex, and often contradictory, framework. At the risk of being reductionist, Bohn identifies its key tenets as six in number, each coupled with a brief and precise summary, and are as follows: psychic automatism, the marvellous, objective chance, the exquisite corpse, the supreme point, and delirious love. As each tenet certainly requires close study to fully appreciate it is important to emphasise here their mutual aspiration to “redefine the relation between each person and the physical world” (5).

For such an ambitious system that strives to change life, poetry becomes the evidence of the surrealist adventure and no anthology on the subject is complete without the writing of its founder and greatest purveyor, André Breton. Although Bohn has omitted some major poems by surrealism's “pope,” such as the canonical “Free Union,” he has included some examples scarcely found in English, particularly Breton's collaborative poems with René Char and Paul Éluard. “With a Red-Hot Iron” is very much characterised by the removal of authorial control stimulating a language of disinterested coalescence:

The glance that will cover my shoulders
 With the night's indecipherable net
 Will be like a rain of eclipse
 It will descend slowly from its solar flame
 My arms around its neck (101)

The language is indirect—typical of surrealist verse—along with the preoccupation of the relationship between the individual and elemental forces. Elsewhere in the volume, rapprochements of this nature are abundant. Benjamin Péret's homage to surrealist patron saint Lautréamont and his eternal “Beautiful as...” simile, relies on

the same revelatory encounter that juxtaposes unlikely images with the concept of beauty, engendering the radical reconstitution of its association: “beautiful as a hole in a window / beautiful as the sudden encounter of a waterfall and a bottle” (“Naked as My Mistress,” 323). Among the original surrealists writing in French, Bohn has included some post-war affiliates such as the Mauritian poet Malcolm De Chazal, who, for his visionary aphorisms and *l’humour noir*, won Breton’s immediate acclaim:

The carrot
Gobbled
The mouth
Of the horse
Which
Was eating
Its nose (“Magic Sense,” 149)

Bohn also includes the Belgian poet Marianne van Hirtum, whose intimate lyricism evokes the surreal as a defamiliarising agent:

I listen to the gondolas playing
on strings of wind pickles
dream of a mammoth life
in leaves harder
than the three stones of our love
If you have nothing to add
come share my cylindrical solitude (“In These Rooms,” 237)

In the Spanish language, José María Hinojosa’s “Oneiric Text no. 2” is an outstanding example of automatic writing beyond its original French practice, and is evidence of the Spanish avant-garde’s successful experimentation with surrealist idiom. Hinojosa’s poem clearly uses the free association of dream-language: reminiscent of Breton’s automatic texts, his syntax holds structure while his oneiric procession of imagery traces *the marvellous*:

Enveloped in the sound of waves, I intercept all my thoughts trying to escape through the hatchway, and while I place my hand on Napoleon’s forehead my head rolls over Niagra Falls (...) I could bathe myself quietly by the light of the moon without wetting my body wrapped in the original copy of the “Epistle to the Corinthians.” (223)

To a lesser degree, in his “Ode to Federico García Lorca,” Pablo Neruda’s poetic lyricism tends towards absorbing surrealist practice to enhance the emotive quality of his imagery in this startling homage to Lorca:

If I could cry from fear of a solitary house,
if I could remove my eyes and eat them,
I would do it for your orange tree voice dressed in
 mourning
and for your poetry screaming as it emerges. (289)

Alluding to Lorca’s execution by Falangist militiamen, Neruda’s meditation on the Spanish poet is the poem’s thematic basis while surrealist logic extends its reality—presenting an imagery of hallucinatory nature.

The personalised styling of Neruda’s lament exemplifies a type of use of surrealist rhetoric, and compiled among the most dogmatic practitioners, Bohn’s *Surrealist Poetry* showcases the range of surrealism’s poetic language, constituting an impressive account of surrealist verse. This anthology is a remarkable feat and will be of great value to many readers—it is surprising, playful and marvellous; it is often lurid and challenging, but never dull.

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