



**Interview with Larry Sawyer, author of
*Unable to Fully California***

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Interviewed by [David Madgalene](#)

Surrealist Poetry is alive and well and living in America today, thanks in no small part to Larry Sawyer, and his first book, *Unable to Fully California* gives cause for rejoicing. For example, from "Miracle of Apples":

Someday the apples will be liberated, the pear
will start a revolution and the banana will
commit suicide, rather than be executed

(10, ll. 1-3)

Recently David Madgalene was gifted with the opportunity to conduct an e-mail interview with Larry Sawyer about Surrealism in general and his wonderful new book in specific.

David: Larry, Paul Hoover has said that your new book, *Unable to Fully California*, is "fresh and unexpectable," further "anything can happen and does." All of that is true, and all the more true for its defense of Surrealism. While your poetry obviously wasn't written in Paris circa 1920s-30s (i.e., the place and time wherein Surrealism was founded and is historically associated), and the high level of your writing suggests that it isn't automatic, nevertheless, for example, your poem "Late Night Movies" (reprinted here in its entirety):

A train emerges from your
Mouth. Across the platform of our lives
Your lips are melting igloos. Could our
Conversation be any colder? Spring sparrows
Noticed it, your skirt of complications.

Your stilettos stab the pavement like my heart.
I crossed great waves to find you and dove
Into an ocean of metaphysics to discover
Your home there at the bottom. You lounge inside an
Echo. Your fragrance is eternal: I can't escape it.
Did I try to escape? That's exactly what I can't
Remember. I'm shackled by freezing
Rain on my window, deliriously silent.
Who am I, who are you? These are questions
We ask the hours. Each of them.

(page 62)

demonstrates several of the benchmarks for Surrealist Poetry that M. H. Abrams enumerated in the third edition of his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston. 1971), and they are 1) free association, 2) nonlogical and non-chronological, 3) dreamlike (also "erotic," although Abrams doesn't list this) and 4) the juxtapositions of seemingly unrelated images (168). These and other Surrealist benchmarks characterize much, if not all, of the work in *Unable to Fully California*. Do you see yourself as a Surrealist, or merely influenced by Surrealism? Would you object to being characterized as perhaps the best poetic defense of Surrealism in the past several decades?

Larry: I feel fortunate—thank you—to be interviewed about my book, which wasn't conceived as a defense of surrealism, although I can see the parallels. Automatism plays a minor role in the writing of any poem but when it's the primary focus of any kind of art the key word typically used to describe that art is "surreal."

The Surrealists who immigrated to New York during WWII had a direct effect on the Abstract Expressionist painters they met there. Jackson Pollock commented once that while painting he was unaware of the act itself and I can say that writing for me does involve a complete immersion of that kind in what I'm doing but I wouldn't say it's automatism necessarily.

It was actually Pierre Reverdy who famously said "The more the relationship between two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional power and poetic reality." So, the idea of using the preconceptions of the reader to create these disparate structures with surprising results interests me mostly. I've always admired the writing of the Surrealist group—namely Paul Éluard and André Breton. I do take what you say as a compliment—if that's what you mean by "surrealism."

David: However, is it free association if it isn't spontaneous? Does perhaps *Unable to Fully California* smack more of cut up or collage, if you will, than free association? Does one allow for cut up and/or collage as free association? However, this can't hold true for cut up and/or collage that has been "edited," can it? After all, couldn't *Unable to Fully California's* violated

syntax, for another example, be an indicator of cut-and-paste or any number of other philosophies and/or techniques as well as Surrealism per se?

Larry: "If Our Love Was a Raft in That Film of the Fifties" was written completely spontaneously for Lina Ramona Vitkauskas and I didn't revise it after the first draft. But I do revise fairly heavily as a rule. Ask any poet writing about his or her methodology, however, and you'll get an idea that each has some idiosyncratic explanation regarding how the poem arose from the blank page. I once called my poetry "Infinitist." Some metaphors extend throughout a poem and give the poem a synesthesiastic quality. Words can be revolving doors:

it takes real talent to be this
crazy us
walking le morning

The inertia created by the poet can be jarring or exhilarating depending on the readers' expectation. I don't read poetry in order to confirm what I already think I know. I expect an entirely new experience, something that is also felt. Often there is too much of an emphasis on finding the single meaning of a poem when the poet is actually generating a multitude of meanings with the reader. It's not for everyone but I'm doing what interests me. Some of my poems are expansive. Others seem miniscule like a Joseph Cornell assemblage:

Butterflies are
Puzzles of our former lives.
But he is elephant. That
Exception and the
Surrounding meadow
Its tender symmetry.

I would say to other poets, don't rely too heavily on any random effect. But do use cut-up methods and sometimes keep what originated by chance. I accentuate the unreliability and malleability of language.

David: Surely, the poems in *Unable to Fully California* are too perfect(ed) to be the result of automatic writing (perhaps the one criteria of bona fide Surrealism that doesn't appear intrinsically manifest)?

Larry: I don't know whether perfection was necessarily the goal but I'm glad to see that my poetry has produced such questions. The first half of the Roberto Bolaño novel *The Savage Detectives* is titled "Mexicans Lost in Mexico"—I often feel like an American lost in America. I express this by using many writing styles, but not all of my poetry exemplifies that mode of disassociation.

David: There can't be two poems in *Unable* that are shaped/structured/-look alike on the page. Surely this must be the result of conscientious industry?

Larry: Many books of poetry I've seen recently don't have much stylistic variation within them, so I wanted to avoid that glaring homogeneity.

David: Roger Shattuck has commented that Surrealism is seldom funny, although "black humor" is or can be a Surreal indicator. A number of the poems in *Unable to Fully California* are veritable laugh riots, although they are not necessarily "black humor." Comment?

Larry: By making the implausible plausible in poetry, the reader can become aware, via these scenarios, how our innate tendency to find logic in the most illogical situations can relieve the suffering in the human condition. By locating the absurd on the map and pointing it out by magnifying it with poetry, we're in a sense freed of the limitations that are placed on us by life. Humor, black or otherwise, is probably the most effective way to illustrate that kind of absurdity and to free ourselves from these self-imposed limitations that we find to be an unfortunate by-product of modern life. I think the media is the primary culprit in the theft of our self-identities. I look to poetry for a reawakening of the sensibilities.

David: Is your work the result of, and/or finds its genesis in, hallucinations? If so, do you have any preferred methods to induce your hallucinations?

Larry: There are everyday hallucinations, too. If William Blake were alive he'd say the same.

David: In his *Second Manifeste du Surréalisme* (La Révolution Surréaliste, December 1929), Breton wrote: "Everything leads one to believe that there exists a certain point in the mind from which life and death, the real and imaginary, the past and the future, what is communicable, the high and the low, cease to be perceived as contradictory." Hasn't that point been determined to be outside the mind (rather than inside), and isn't that point the Internet? If so, is it still possible to find that point inside one's mind again? I.e., one's one interpersonal point of Surrealist revelation, in contradistinction to Google's extra-personal point of Surrealist revelation? Would you characterize your work as one man's attempt to (re)discover and invoke his own unique Surrealist "truth(s)?"

Larry: I do agree that my vision of poetry is certainly accommodating to surrealism. As for the state of humanity's collective ability to imagine, I've been wondering about that quite a bit lately. I would venture to say that the Internet hasn't helped.

David: One of *Unable to Fully California's* highlights, as noted by Paul Hoover, is "Of René Char" printed below in its entirety:

Trace for us that stony path
that leads to a cobblestone brilliance.
We demand that our love bleed
like yours, and yet the

street was an immediate eclipse of
anguish, befitting genius
like a neon Pepsi sign.
Here in the present day, your assiduous answer.

Leaves as they fell to the ground made
a snarling sound, almost like dead watches.

One after another your critics fell
they wished only to find a happy future
for your books.

Quiet snow, gossip over the hero's grave.

(page 42)

This poem is so matter of fact, so "slice of life." Romantic, if you will. (One of the several discernibly non-Surrealist(ic) poems in *Unable to Fully California* with which Sawyer adroitly peppers his text.) Can "Of René Char" be anything other than what it represents, i.e., two (perhaps more) people walk a stony path past falling leaves to converse over Char's grave amid snowfall? Yet, it's simultaneously, deliciously so surreal, not only perhaps because of Char's evocation, but moreover the street that's "an immediate eclipse of anguish" (beneath a totemic Pepsi sign) with falling leaves snarling like "dead watches." Are the effendis gossiping over the hero's grave in the quiet snow real or surreal? Both? Or neither?

Larry: The impulse behind the poem grew as I learned about René Char's life and struggles and I envisioned this sort of meta-narrative that had a palpable filmic quality (although the poem was written in Greece.) This particular poem predates the others in the book by many years but it has a haunting quality that still holds up.

David: Aragon was "excommunicated" by Breton. Eluard left the movement. Philip Lamantia broke with Surrealism in 1946. Why do you think would someone break with Surrealism, let alone be "excommunicated?" Is it even possible?

Larry: Breton was Philip Lamantia's inroad to the inner circle of French Surrealism but groups of any kind can only withstand so much tension. It seems that a breaking point was reached with many of the primary members but these excommunications had as much to do with personal differences than anything else, probably. With or without Breton's blessing most of the excommunicated went on to continue creating work that has been relevant to many people's lives and that's all that really matters.

David: While undoubtedly American poets, as well as poets across the world and decades, have written their share of surrealist poetry, there apparently doesn't seem to be, or have been, enough of a movement to give credence

to a genre of American Surrealist Poetry (let alone Neo-American Surrealist Poetry)? Is this impression the result of inadequate scholarship in this area, would you say?

Larry: There have certainly been American poets who are somewhat influenced by surrealist methods, although most aren't or weren't Surrealists per se. Will Alexander, James Tate, Charles Simic, John Ashbery, David Shapiro, Frank Lima, Ron Padgett, also Gregory Corso—none of these poets constituted a group. New York School poetry has a somewhat surrealist quality that I love.

The effect of European surrealism on American art has been profound, but like electricity surrealism helps run everything—but no one feels the need to discuss it all the time. Its influence now can be seen more than read it seems—in film and television. I think the film industry has had a somewhat deleterious effect on us all, which is partially why it gets so much attention in my book.

Regarding American poets: I do remember reading Bob Kaufman's poetry and admiring it. Also, some of the most visceral sections of the most famous long poems in English, "The Waste Land" and "Howl" for example, are so memorable precisely because of their surrealist qualities.

Much earlier: Charles Henri Ford published many of the original Surrealist group in his magazine View so there is a precedent.

A cornfield can be surreal or a parking garage if the intent is there—it doesn't have much to do with what it once probably did. Charles Henri Ford dedicated a haiku to me once, "Larry Sawyer/premier American Surrealist/nuff sed" and I responded by sending him a sestina.

When photography was invented there were critics at the time who were convinced that it would make painting obsolete but paintings in the 1980s and even now are selling for millions.

The public is fickle and gravitates toward whatever fashion has been branded as being "new." Unfortunately this consumerism creeps into the world of poetry, too. I'm most interested in a poetry that has a kind of fluidity and that uses a certain element of the absurd because to me that represents life most accurately.

David: Has the influence of Surrealism been so pervasive in modern and postmodern American poetry, that a la Hitchcockian influence on film, so many Hitchcockian devices have been so over-utilized by so many filmmakers, that the apparent influence of Hitchcock has disappeared through no other reason than its overuse?

Larry: The word itself has been deflated of its meaning from overuse, I think, because its intended meaning describes a specific methodology that

relies on automatism to produce a type of art that depicts the hidden mechanism of the subconscious mind. Failed attempts definitely feel cliché.

Fellini or Hitchcock or Kubrick—any great filmmaker is using the camera to capture a super-reality that encapsulates a moment or a series of evocative moments. Some are more surreal than others—Jodorowsky for example. The best efforts have some social significance and an aesthetic value that cannot truly be described but must be experienced. Surrealism has seemed to have a tighter grip on Latin America and Europe than America. Was it Marcel Duchamp who said surrealism is America?

I once commented that I wanted my poetry to have a physical presence and by that I mean that, by experiencing the implicit meaning in the poems, each act of reading them creates another separate experience that is true to that particular moment.

I'm really intent on creating these beautiful, artificial landscapes. I do want readers to be able to walk through my poems and come away with a more genuine or real sense of what life can be. We all seem to be searching for the impossible.

David: Speaking of film (surrealist or otherwise), of particular interest are Sawyer's takes on film and television and the film industry (surrealist or otherwise). Of the 107 poems in *Unable to Fully California*, fifteen poems (possibly more) focus on film and TV and the industry. Several others contain film references in passim while several others may or may not reference film. For example, on the intrinsic evidence, it's impossible to determine if "Roly Poly" is about film or some other genre:

In the audience
sin is a humid night,
a flock of trumpets
on a day like yesterday.
Like a swarm of advertisements
buxom doors
herald your love of
dimly lit rooms.
At the bottom of electric lakes
watch
the edge of eyes.
Chainsaw, plunge, through a waterfall
of wood.
Obtuse silhouettes on
deflated vines murmur.
You harvest their blue fruit.
So much larger than yourself this
inescapable tomorrow.

(page 12)

"Hollywoody" tells of a famous screenwriter "famously tired and bored," who, further expands "like an accordion, belching Ave Maria" as he, well:

His underwear was down around his ankles as he received
fellatio
from a Burger King
(page 13, ll. 15-16)

Such an image is surely surreal? Exercise guru Richard Simmons receives a similar surreal diss:

...Your hair is daring while your
silver splashed leotard and huge golden star
emblazoned on your chest seems
the dingy upon which millions float as they
drift aimlessly from channel to channel like
seasick fire stations.
(“Richard Simmons,” page 71, ll. 5-10)

while iconoclastic director Wes Anderson (Rushmore, The Royal Tennenbaums) receives a well-deserved kudos: (50)

We are chess pieces in the snow, Wes Anderson,
rare bird of hope.
(“Wes Anderson Magpie,” page 50, ll. 14-15)

“The Big Break” (page 80) is satiric tour de force where Sawyer skewers nearly every leading man in recent cinematic history. In “If Our Love Was a Raft in That Film of the Fifties,” Sawyer again toys with perception when he writes:

And not being Marilyn Monroe, your life will
Be infinitely richer, because it is real.
(page 124, ll. 14-15)

Yet it's in “Another Dream Poem” where Sawyer affirms:

each generation tasked to redefine the good
must carve some knowledge into choice
(ibid ll. 18-19)

Big Bridge accepts Sawyer's challenge, and, thus tasked to redefine the good, and to be held thus accountable, Big Bridge chooses to carve the names of Larry Sawyer and his first book, Unable to Fully California, into the rock. Larry Sawyer is the flag-bearer for the remnant (or is it perhaps better-said revenant?) Surrealist impulse in contemporary American Poetry. W. H. Auden said that Bryon's "genius was essentially a comic one." Sawyer has a

comic genius. He also has a Surrealist genius and perhaps a prophetic genius as well. As to which genius predominates, we can eagerly look forward to Sawyer's future works to enlighten us.

Note: Sources for this article included "Surrealism" and related entries in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, edited by Margaret Drabble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics: Enlarged Edition*, edited by Alex Preminger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).