

ALL NATURE INTO MOTION

John Sutherland's Poetry

Miriam Waddington

... as if the sun
Were singing to the world, he lay and heard
His alter ego serenading him:
At dawn tomorrow he would rise again
And, by the force of arms, enforce the cold.
(The Warrior)

It is the lack of a vital tradition that explains how, in Canada, a die-hard conservatism acts as the counterpart of a desire to ape the latest fashion.

John Sutherland, editorial in
First Statement, April 1944.

JOHNSUTHERLAND published less than a dozen poems during his lifetime; none of them aped the latest fashion and neither did any of them belong to the tradition of die-hard conservatism. His language is still as fresh and personal today as when he wrote the poems, and his themes of human loneliness and anxiety and the search for a stable identity, are, if anything, even more relevant now than twenty years ago.

When Sutherland died in 1956 he left a manuscript of 43 poems¹ which he had indexed and given the title of *First Poems*. Like the shoemaker and tailor of folk legend who cobble shoes and sew clothes for the whole world while they themselves go barefoot and naked, Sutherland was too busy editing and publishing the work of his companions to pay much attention to his own. He was only 36 at the time of his death, and had suffered from illness (which he chose to ignore)² since

early adolescence, yet during his short lifetime he managed to edit and publish two little magazines, *First Statement* and *Northern Review*, and he participated in the editing of a third one, *Index*. He wrote innumerable essays, put together a highly individual anthology of poetry, *Other Canadians*, and, during the last year of his life, published a critical book on the poetry of E. J. Pratt.

When I look back to 1943, the year I met John Sutherland, I am struck by a very obvious fact which had little meaning for me at that time. Sutherland did not simply drift into becoming a writer and critic. He was not a university teacher, so it had nothing to do with making his way in the world, nor was he a failed novelist, or, as I intend to show, a failed poet. He simply had one of those rare vocations for criticism, and since he felt himself to be deeply of his country and his time, he devoted himself to criticism of Canadian writing with authority and conviction.

It is tempting to look back and say we didn't deserve him; we certainly didn't give him the recognition or help he deserved; he was poor, and until his marriage, lived in the same room where he kept his hand-press on Montreal's Craig Street. But we must have deserved him or he wouldn't have happened to us at all.

It isn't my purpose here to recall memories and impressions of the literary personalities of the forties. Nor is it my purpose to discuss the relation between the events of Sutherland's life and his poetry with nostalgic sentimentality; enough error has already been committed in that direction, and I hope, by looking at Sutherland's work, to correct it.

It would be interesting to know whether Sutherland felt himself to be primarily a poet or a critic. According to his sister Betty Layton,³ he felt himself to be first of all a poet, but was discouraged from poetry by various influences around him, whereas his critical activities met with an immediate response. He was surrounded by other writers — Louis Dudek, Raymond Souster, Anne Marriott, Irving Layton and myself, among the poets, and by William McConnell, Ethel Wilson, and Mavis Gallant among the novelists. Writers need editors and publishers, and speaking for myself, I needed Sutherland to be an editor and critic, and not a poet. I did not even pay much attention to his poetry. I recognized the individuality of his poems whenever I came across them, but I did not seek them out, or understand them when I found them. And it was only by chance, when I came upon some of them again in old issues of *Poetry Chicago* and *First Statement*, that I decided to look more closely at all of them.

The two qualities that impressed me most in the poems I came across accidentally were, as I said earlier, the freshness of the language, and the timeliness

of the themes. Sutherland read Thomas, Auden, and Spender just like the rest of us, but he consistently avoided the luxurious or topical metaphor. In fact his language is seldom quick or colourful and rarely energetic. It is, on the contrary, stubbornly persistent, slow, tough and vaulted. Underneath Sutherland's poems one feels great intellectual power, for in his poems as well as in his criticism, Sutherland is concerned with ideas. I know it's the style for poets to be inspired liars, insane prophets and tormented human beings. Poets are supposed to have only revealed ideas as opposed to rational ones, yet a quick reading of any of Milton's poems or of Shelley's *Triumph of Life* will convince the reader that one's own spit, a quick fix, astrology, and a soft heart, never were, and never will be enough for poetry.

Sutherland's poems remain timely because they are about the problem of identity. How does a person become aware of himself as a self, a separate being in a world where everything is not only constantly moving, but where even time has an impatient and indifferent quality and threatens to destroy all those who cannot move within its rhythms? How can the individual find enough stillness to define himself even momentarily? How can he hold off the assaults of the world? Should he escape the empirical world or try to make peace with objective reality?

If he is an authentic poet, the poet's self is never just a private self. His anxieties speak for all our anxieties. He may, as John Stuart Mill pointed out in one of his essays on poetry, be engaged in a dialogue with himself, but if he publishes his poems, he wants us to hear and overhear him.

Sutherland devotes many poems to the situation of being alone in the world, but he does not stop there. His poems are poems of anxiety, but not of despair. Unlike many poems written today which reflect and helplessly accept anxiety and fragmentation, Sutherland's poems contain a critical response to these feelings. In the group of four poems which he published in *Poetry* in 1946⁴ the anxiety he expresses is distinguished by the fact that Sutherland does not stop at the point of expression. His language is not incantatory and contains none of the hysteria which is now so greatly admired. Hysteria is admired because, while it challenges nothing in the social status quo, it still supplies the reader with a vicarious experience of looking into a tamed (and sugary) wilderness of the soul, and the — by now — domesticated existential abyss.

In an essay, "Psychoanalysis and Literary Culture Today",⁵ Alfred Kazin suggests that hysteria is the mode of expression of writers who no longer have real feelings but wish that they did. It is only an age like ours which has used up its capacity to feel (because it has lost the objects and institutions which can arouse

passionate anger, grief or love), which begins to worship violence and lust. Both violence and lust are unilateral expressions of either the senses, or the mind, and neither requires the human capacity to feel. Pornography is another intellectual mode which serves as a substitute for feeling.

But Sutherland's problem, as expressed in his poems, is not the inability to feel. His is not so much an exhausted sensibility as a threatened one. The dominant feeling in the poems is a fear of loss of identity. Yet it is a fear which Sutherland constantly subjects to thought (not necessarily analysis), and to the striving for more, and not less, consciousness. The fear therefore does not emerge in the poems as either nightmare or grotesque, but as highly patterned and controlled metaphorical language:

Then slipping from him in the room, the walls
Rose towering above him. Craning through
The crannies of the ceiling, carved and lean,
Dark judges, with their beards like icicles
Stared at his body, suddenly as small
As a seed crouching underneath the night.
(Before Night Came)

And here is Sutherland's description of a face:

One day, in shock or indecision, all
The particles will riot in the face:
They'll crack the bony haloes of his cheeks;
Or tear at one another till they roll
In sudden harmony like smoke that seethes
About a hollow eye, then pours away.
(The Face)

There are also the following lines at the end of a long poem about the dangers that beset the self which, in spite of disguises, is always discovered and taken unawares:

For suddenly
Comes the boughs' tapping on the pane,
And then, like glass splintering on the teeth
The burr and splinter of the drill.
(The Wavering Circle)

Or:

When we start up to walk abroad
Fears work and knead us like a crowd
(Fears)

And the worst thing about these fears is, that no matter how you hunt and try to destroy them, they remain impervious. Shots do not “challenge them” and, like sailboats, they “still tack about upon the blood”.

The poet isn't the only one who suffers from fear and ambiguous identity:

He hunts his listeners: but when he peers
Over a shadow solid as a wall
Only his vanished shadow is visible —
Crawling ant-sized across an air of glass
Whose dancing surface fuses with the sun.

(On a Theosophist Friend)

Thus all the people in Sutherland's poems are isolated even when they are in groups. In an early untitled poem we find the following description of people who are afflicted with loneliness in a world whose nature forces them to adopt strategies for mere survival. The mere fact of survival makes gods out of martyrs and transforms defeat into victory. The victory is that those invalids, by dissembling, manage to retain their *wholeness*:

Who knew or saw them when, as invalids
Remote within their twilight rooms, they lay
Like purple shadows clothing sticks of bone?
Or guessed that in the altared pure recess
Lighted by the faint tapers of the flesh,
Those shapes that seemed like dimly-figured nuns
Were the eyes' shadows in their niche of bone
Kneeling in daylong prayer to the eyes?

. . . But they knew how,
By being martyrs, to be gods, and how,
By taking blindness on themselves, to pluck
The eyes out of the forehead of the day.

(Untitled Poem)

In another very striking poem the individual's fear leads him to seek protection from a most unlikely source — his own shadow. This theme of protection and renewal of one part of the self through another part, occurs over and over again as the individual is driven to create something new out of the materials at hand, which will not only protect and shield him, but which will supply something life-giving which the self lacks. In the poem “Triumph” it is “a prescience of rain”:

Not lulled by sleep's pretenses when I see
The star above me in the cave of night

Wink dimly at the zero sign of being,
I rise to force my image on the room.

Glad as I walk to feel my blundering form
Trample on shapes of things that, during day,
Like snakes raise threatening heads to strike and now
Drop their defenceless shadows on the floor,

Striding in might across their heaps of dead,
I pull a hidden cord, and seem to hear
The loud bulb shatter silence with its peals
And fill the darkness with the noise of light.

Afterwards iron stillness. But I stand
Not moving, while unceasing swarms of light
Crawl slowly on their heavy wings, and hive
Their honey in the white comb of the walls.

Brooding all-powerful above their work,
I let my shadow, humid over them,
Tilt like a weighted petal, or a cloud
That fills them with a prescience of rain.

(Triumph)

Not always is the fear objectified so directly; at times it is expressed only through images which, in spite of their precision, still leave the reader to deal with a disturbing kind of inwardness:

A whistling bird of sun
Sang in the lock of selves
And opened folding doors
On shining inner drawers.

(On a Wet Day)

Or else the concrete image of a boat sailing on the water becomes a metaphor for the unsuccessful attempt to escape from some deep and obscure distress:

It [the boat] turns tail until its spear-tip
Meets a shadow's wedge
That's driven like a spade
Slant-wise through the waved bed of sun.

As it spurts this way and that
And gains its noisy force,
Still louder and darker grows the shadow.

(Combat)

The poems that were published in *Poetry* deal not so much with undefined fears like the above, as with the strategies which the self must adopt in order to keep the dangers outside and under control. "The Aquarium" is a poem about barriers, and like all barriers, they prevent the self from moving in its own chosen direction. The problem is clearly stated in the first stanza:

When sentries, tall as mountains on the roads,
 Refused him entry into any place,
 He planned to change identity with clothes;
 A surgeon he would make another face.

And not only will the 'I' of this poem play surgeon, but he will use a mirror as his cutting and shaping instrument. Besides being sharp, the mirror is an instrument for creating illusory images; by using a mirror to sharpen a disguise we get the proliferation of illusion — a brilliant metaphoric touch:

And with the glass of mirrors where he saw
 His preening image glossy with aplomb,
 He'd cut the self till its perfected flaws
 Could strike the worst of his accusers dumb.

Thus one illusion helps to shape another. All the same, the disguises and improvements cannot save the speaker in the poem who, shaped by mirrors, is still cut off from the world by a double layer of glass:

Hugging his future he had troubled dreams.
 A glass knight on a horse of glass, he rode
 And threatened like a tower of the good:
 Locked behind glass, in an aquarium,
 Bared his deception to the public eye
 And showed his virtue shining with the lie.

The glass knight is locked not only into his armour, transparent and fragile as it is, but into an aquarium, a sort of glass cage, glass within glass, where he is not only on show, but where his virtue is shown to be a lie.

There is a curious combination here of sensory perception and idea, and there is also the obvious paradox of "the virtue shining with the lie". All common enough. But what is the seeming virtue that turns out to be a deception? The pretended virtue is bravery — the knight "who threatened like a tower of the good" — knows himself to be really a coward who underneath his masks and

disguises, and beyond the ornamental glitter and apparent transparency of the glass which composes him, is a man who was never there.

In “The Double Man” we have another poem about the separated self, who, upon seeing “his life-like figure in the mirror” seeks to learn how to live like everyone else, how to act in ways which the average man knows about instinctively but which the artist has to learn painfully:

Departing, he would learn the parlor trick
Of living like the average individual:
Get life by heart and then be free to travel
Slick and amphibious on different levels.

In the next stanza the speaker discovers that it’s more than a parlor trick, because no matter how slick you are, a million external matters always take up the living space which the self needs:

When the one pipe that he built specially
For his communication with the world
Is filled by shifting interest like silt,
He clears it so he’ll have a little room
In which to chatter, strut and parody
The boring, hackneyed art of being human.

Apparently the task of clearing away the silt from the pipe through which he hoped to channel his exchanges with the world is so tiresome, that by the time he completes it, the speaker finds there is no self there anyway — only an empty cloak with a capacity to imitate and parody human gestures.

This emptiness and sense of being driven back upon a self, which, like Ibsen’s Peer Gynt, has no real core, but only various layers, leads to a further retreat from the world. In the poem *With Expert Tailoring*, the poet finally barricades himself into a house where everything is altered to fit his needs. He suddenly gets the feeling that if he can do this to objects he may also “Rule out of doors, and take a step and kill/A stranger when he passed him in the street.”

This is a cheerless omnipotence of the kind most children experience, except that most children don’t write poetry about it. There is another very daring and original poem in Sutherland’s manuscript about omnipotence and creativity. The poem is called *The Creator* and grows out of a disturbing concept. The central image or metaphor is disturbing because it concerns God or some other figure masturbating, and in this fashion, creating the world out of himself and by himself.

Sutherland’s image is logical, his tone is serious, and the poem is not intended

to startle the reader in any way. The poem shows, more dramatically than anything else, Sutherland's habit of pursuing an idea logically to wherever it took him, even if the path happened to be an untravelled one:

In desperation, as a last resort
 He chose that love-act, which like suicide
 Drags all the world down with the drowning lover.
 Gripping his sex — his life-line, his unseen
 Umbilicus that stretched out to the earth —
 He leaned his whole weight back; and [as he]⁶ felt
 His passion like a groundswell in the room
 Cant upward, taking him along with it,
 As the light broke upon an answering wave,
 All the world's images came tumbling back.

Those two waves meeting with an equal force
 Were for a moment one; he and the world
 That rode their crests, and, meeting like two lovers,
 Melted together at the very top,
 Became as one, were joined in all their parts,
 Till with the saddening swift recoil, he fell
 Back on the sharp trough into emptiness;
 And down away from him, the scattering world
 Littered the beaches of the afternoon.

(The Creator)

The last two lines seem to me very beautiful and memorable; yet the whole poem grows out of an image which most people would find repugnant. The poet himself finds it distasteful because, although "that love-act" results in a new world, the creator is ultimately thrown back "into emptiness".

Sutherland comes to a similar conclusion about the aridity and pointlessness of self-sufficiency in a poem of that title. The character described in this poem attains self-sufficiency. He has successfully sidetracked his fear and defended himself against it, but the price is terrible suffering and a deathly silence in which all will is atrophied:

And so his thrifty tongue is motionless
 And rusted like a bell-tongue, never new;
 His white hand, locked in palsy as a winter,
 Sheds flesh in snow, and cannot put a halt
 To plenty when it pours itself away
 Or soothe the hollowness that's like a pain.

(Self-sufficiency)

In fact nothing can “soothe the hollowness that’s like a pain” except union with something or someone outside the self. Sutherland concludes that the individual has to find, as an antidote to his fear and loneliness, not more retreats or increasingly effective disguises, but a moment of stillness where one self can unite with another, and through that other, experience himself differently. “Snowless Moment” is such a poem:

Our stiff poles
Held up the sky,
Warning any snow-flake
That it would splinter and divide
And shatter into pieces against us.

We seemed made of very little —
Two or three rope-like arteries,
Occasionally waving
To keep the snow suspended
And the space clear above our heads
So no crust of time could form on us;
And constant watchfulness
Made us perfect mirrors for ourselves.

(Snowless Moment)

Union with the other is depicted in terms of a rigidity and stillness which must be won from a fluid and chaotic world. The poet creates a protective space where “no crust of time could form on us”. The lovers are thus timeless but not spaceless. They keep the snow suspended and themselves too. They are made of very little, just two or three rope-like arteries, so in this sense they personify the channels through which blood (and life) must flow.

This need to find a point of stillness in the confusion of a moving world also underlies a twelve-line poem called “The Boat”. It concerns the fragmentariness of reflections seen in water and the distortions of seeing which such changing water images invite. Against this randomness of vision, Sutherland opposes rational vision as something intelligent and wilful, — the kind of vision which seeks to encounter something real and concrete like “the solid ground” instead of the illusory reflections to be found on the water’s surface:

The eyes, through open portholes, letting vision
Fall like leads through the creased folds of water,
Graze, at the ultimate bottom, over dark fields,
Foraging in pockets till they nod to rest.

Union can take place between two people but it can also take place between people and objects, as often happens in Sutherland's world and perhaps in our own too. All of us must have noticed at times that objects seem to have a life of their own. They are elusive, contrary, secretive and often malevolent. In Sutherland's poems, objects share the speaker's fondness for disguise and deception. So objects which were "obsequious when he walked among them" later "crouch" and "hide in the twilight safety of their skins" or even seed themselves like dandelion parachutes:

Or with a counterfeit of motion gained
From his scythe limbs, that, mowing the tall light,
Shed them like thistles on the travelling wind,
They seeded in a farther valley for him. . . .
(Untitled Poem)

Finally, these objects which move when he moves, and are still when he is still, (because in some way man and object are related) pull the whole world into a beautiful sweeping motion at the very moment when the man begins to move:

The natural objects did not move or stir
Until his limbs moved like a clock's hands pulling
All nature into motion after them.
(Untitled Poem)

I said earlier that Sutherland's poems are about loneliness, but I also indicated that they offer at least two ways out of the situation of being alone: one is through a spiritual union with another person or object, and the other is by confirmation of the individual through the existence of some objective reality outside the self. This recourse to outside reality is especially evident in the satirical poems, notably, "The Snake Machine".⁷ The latter poem takes the form of an ironic parable about art and reality, but apart from what it tells us about transformation and the shifting nature of reality, it also demonstrates Sutherland's fondness for the conjunction of the natural biological image with the mechanical one. His poems abound with the mixed-up paraphernalia of a technical world — clocks, mirrors, sewer pipes, cameras, wires, poles, anchors, light bulbs and locks of every kind. Sutherland was not as interested in producing a beautiful poem as he was in producing one that corresponded to what he considered reality: "The Snake Machine" is about the difficulty of getting at reality through poetry or the imagination alone. For reality, like the Snake Machine "... is moving, but always

moving in the same place, / shedding an old skin with each rippling motion / And becoming a new snake exactly like the old one.” The poet ends by reacting against the one-sidedness of imagination and art with a plea for some concrete reality:

“O for a real snake shedding a real skin!”

But Sutherland’s devotion to reality is not always so complex or didactic. He is often contented with an image which conveys some surface reality, attractive or not. “Girl in Spring” is a closely observed portrait which ends:

Her lips distended
In a huge pout,
Partly opened
With the beautiful ugliness
You have noticed if you have beheld
The swan when drinking.
(Girl in Spring)

But the poem which I return to most often, and which states the original dilemma of loneliness and also combines Sutherland’s two ways of meeting it is the poem about Thomas Wolfe:⁸

Wolfe, on the bed, was struggling to remove
The bandage of the dream around his eyes;
His hands, unconscious, hunted for the feel
Of objects thrusting up their wicker veins
To build the framework of reality.

Caught in the web, but planning to restore
All things in proper place upon the shelf,
He held the fallen earth and tried to roll
The play-hoop of the planet with a spin
Starting it on its orbit once again;

But as its shape swung by him like a scythe
Cutting a swathe of sky, he saw the world
All moving in the river of his eyes —
He saw half-wakened objects, caught like wasps,
Fuss in the glowing amber of the air.

In this poem, although the dying writer “hunts for the feel of objects” so he can “build the framework of reality”, they elude him. The world is too much “all moving”, so that even the objects are caught up, “half-wakened” and resistant in “the fallen earth’s” inevitable movement. The artist cannot start the world “on

its orbit once again”, nor can he restore us to Eden. But he can go a long way in transforming the world which exists, with all its buzzing and busy objects as Sutherland’s own life demonstrated. Perhaps when the “half-wakened objects” — whatever they stand for — are fully awakened to critical consciousness, they will no longer need to be imprisoned in “the glowing amber of the air”, but will fly free and help to build the framework of the larger more spacious reality which Sutherland envisaged.

¹ This was made available to me by his widow, Mrs. Audrey Sutherland.

² Sutherland’s mother died of TB when he was 6 years old, and when he was 13 he was found to have TB of the kidney. When I met him in 1943 he told me that he had been hospitalized at the age of 18 or 19, and seeing no end to his cure, he simply left the hospital and never returned.

³ In conversation with me.

⁴ *In the Aquarium, The Double Man, With Expert Tailoring, Self-Sufficiency.*

⁵ In *The Partisan Review Anthology* edited by William Phillips and Philip Rahv; 1962. London, Macmillan, pp. 238-246.

⁶ I have added the two words in the brackets.

⁷ *First Statement*, September/October 1948, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 21-22.

⁸ *First Statement*, August 1944, Vol. 2, No. 8, p. 15.

A LANDSCAPE OF JOHN SUTHERLAND

Miriam Waddington

we are
in flight
we are
a space of
dreamed-of
light
autumn canyons
crevices

A LANDSCAPE OF JOHN SUTHERLAND

we are the blue
between
the sliding doors
of sky

we fall
among the shells
the molluscs
of our concerts
on the earth
our bones
are toys
and trumpets
for the wind
our song
sand
on a shore

our eyes
are owls
who scold
the lit-up
winter night
our skeletons
snow animals
prowling
through the
quiet moment
of landscape

that is
what I like
best to find
the quiet moment
shadowless
in the roar
of landscape
to be the
landscape