The Philosophy of As If
by Fraser Sutherland

Reviewed by Carmelo Militano

Fraser Sutherland is a well-known and respected poet and a book reviewer; his reviews have graced the pages of The Globe and Mail for many years and he was once the managing editor of Books in Canada. He is also a free-lance journalist. Indeed, he began his writing life as a journalist.

Sutherland has published fourteen books and his poetry has been translated into French, Italian, Albanian, Serbo-Croatian, and Farsi. He is the kind of person Canada produces with some frequency, that is, an international Canadian, or at the very least a Canadian with an international perspective. Sutherland admits he has drunk deep from the well of Anglo-American-Canadian literature.

Sutherland’s work as a journalist appears to have influenced his poetry. His sentences and images are clean and unadorned and accessible, his poetic aesthetic reminiscent of George Orwell’s stated aim when writing a political essay: that his prose be clear and transparent as a windowpane. The poetic voice Sutherland adopts reflects this aesthetic; it is the voice of an everyman. The tone of the poems is modest and self-effacing, coming across as the voice of an ordinary Canadian, chummy and friendly, in the way it addresses and considers those “who are not famous / and will never be.”

In “Bar Gitanos,” Sutherland wears the hat of the poet as a genteel extrovert, and when asked to dance proclaims, “but I’m not drunk enough, or too drunk with soda scotch / and say I only dance when inspired. / The small neat woman in bangs says, / “I’ll try not to take that personally . . .” (12) Note how the internal poetic language here appears to be much like that of ordinary conversation and the retort by the woman slightly droll. It all sounds and feels so Canadian, including the situation of the poet being not quite boozy enough to dance. He is after all an awkward man.

Sutherland’s poems are direct and unaffected and their humour is light and witty. There is no attempt at complicated artistry or worldly sophistication; instead, many of the
poems read and feel authentic by being almost corny. If you listen carefully, you can also hear the cadences of Al Purdy’s poetry in the background. Purdy after all is the quintessential poet to wear the “I am just an ordinary guy” mask with élan. His “At the Quinte Hotel” has faint echoes in Sutherland’s poem “Bar Gitanos”; you can also hear his influence in the casual style and sound in such poems as “And I promise, if you need me,” “Patience,” and “Explanation.” I am not suggesting that Sutherland is a Purdy clone or knock-off, merely that they share a simple, unadorned style.

Sutherland’s use of irony underlines his genteel conventional approach to poetry. He reveals himself to be an old-fashioned romantic poet, his yearnings and apprehensions clear and unambiguous. Look at the following lines from the poem “From an Imaginary Folksong”: “Remember a slim glass vase, / twin stems intertwined. / Imagine us like that” (20). Or from the same poem the lines “In our moments / we were too long together. / We should not forget” (23). The poem is a quiet elegy to lost love and unlike, say, a Leonard Cohen love poem, it does not explore its dark corners and edges. Love in a Cohen poem is more than a feeling; often it also involves issues such as need, control, loss, power, and identity, whereas Sutherland’s love poems lack the sensual complexity and the shades of dark and light that so many contemporary love poems express.

“Arms surround ourselves, we are going / deeper, the cave encloses the explorer hardened” (34). These lines are from the erotic poem “Self-Consumed.” Here Sutherland writes metaphorically about sex and ends up sounding comical. The poem aspires to be a serious erotic love poem but his noted directness is replaced by metaphors that slip silently into cliché. Erotic poems tend to work best when they imply rather than expose or describe. I am thinking of Michael Ondaatje’s poems in his collection Handwriting, for example, whose power lies in their ability to both suggest and reveal.

Sutherland writes about the transformational power of poetry. Part Three consists of a long poem called “And All Shall Be Redeemed.” It is constructed around a series of transformations or reversals, some serious, some ironic, and some comic.

and comedy and tragedy shall retire as roadies emeritus

and a ball shall be a base, a basket, a foot, a hand

and the cold cat warming his bum on the dusty rusty

bathroom grate shall be warm in the end (58)
The poem is a grab bag of images, attitudes, perceptions, puns, and a shifting poetic voice. Its rhythm invokes Dylan Thomas’s “And Death Shall Have No Dominion” as well as the chiding, moralizing voice of an Old Testament prophet. At other times the voice is whimsical and strives to be magical in the enumerating of mock reversals and reconciliations. The poem, in short, seeks to catalogue and reconcile opposites: “and the drive to wage total war, the wars to bring peace, shall / convert to sheer mere energy” (75), “and red alerts shall turn a tasteful shade of turquoise” (75), “and committees shall redraw camels / and worker bees shall forego class envy and drones penis / envy” (61).

How one reacts to the long poem depends in part on how one feels about whimsy and the piling on of the obvious. The reversals are cute but not particularly surprising and the playfulness of the poem is indeed fun, but when Sutherland decides to be serious, the energy and emotional temperature of the poem drop.

Overall, this collection speaks to an audience that likes its poetry straight-up or neat, that is, clear and perfect as an amber glass of single malt scotch whiskey.

Carmelo Militano is a Winnipeg poet and writer. His latest collection is Feast Days (Olive Press, 2009).

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