Top of Form

*Image from Poetry Reading in Bucharest, Romania.*



[Paul Sutherland](https://www.linkedin.com/in/paul-sutherland-58361519?trk=pulse-det-athr_prof-art_hdr)

Sufi Thought in Paul Sutherland’s Poetry, by Monica Manolachi



  



Today I am going to talk about five poetry collections written by Paul Sutherland, a British poet who converted to Islam in 2004, when he became a follower of Shaykh Nazim Al-Haqqani and was given the name Abdul Wadud (which means the servant of the Loving One in Arabic). He was born in Canada in 1947 and arrived in the United Kingdom in 1973, where he has lived ever since.

My presentation has two parts.

Firstly, I will briefly refer to the Western cultural, social and religious context of the last decade (British, in particular), focusing on the conditions in which Sufi poetry has become a source of spirituality and on the type of performative identity which it inspires.

Secondly, this essay maps Paul Sutherland’s personal poetic journey from Canada to the United Kingdom and eventually to the world of Islam, by commenting on several extracts from five of his collections.

**Context**. (1) From a historical point of view, the presence of Sufi thought in Western poetry and literature in general is not new and it can be traced back to the nineteenth century, for example, when great poets such as the German J. W. von Goethe or the British John Keats advocated intercultural exchange. In his last work, entitled the *West East Divan* (1819), Goethe drew extensively on the Oriental literature and the Qur’an.

It is a well-known fact among literary scholars that John Keats conceived a term which he called “negative capability”, meaning “the capacity of human beings to transcend and revise their contexts” or “the ability of the individual to perceive, think and operate beyond any presupposition of a predetermined capacity of the human being”. It can also be understood as “the artist’s receptiveness to the world and its natural marvel”. In Keats’s own words, negative capability is “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (wiki).

This term has nowadays been taken over by psychoanalysts, philosophers and social theorists who explain processes of empowerment. For example, the Brazilian author Roberto Mangabeira Unger wrote about how human beings innovate and resist within confining social contexts.

(2) Because Paul Sutherland is a convert, it is worth looking at the recent history of conversions to Islam in the UK. After 2001, the phenomenon has been studied by scholars who belong to various fields such as sociology, psychology, contemporary history of religions etc.

In a doctoral thesis published in 1996, entitled *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts*, Ali Köse analyzed the social situation of Muslims in Britain. It was republished as a book in 2010. In it the author expressed his concern that there was limited theoretical and substantive material available about what seemed to be a social trend in the early 1990s. He interviewed 70 converts during 1990-91 in various parts of England, of which 33% were currently involved in Sufism, in order to identify the conditions in which the conversions happened. In the last chapter, the study deals specifically with the conversion to Islam through Sufism, making clear reference to Shaykh Nazim, who was born in Cyprus in 1922, studied in Istanbul and in Syria, and became a public advocate of Islam in the 1970s. He died in 2014. Paul Sutherland is one of his followers and wrote a book dedicated to him, *A Sufi Novice in Shaykh Efendi’s Realm*, to which I am going to refer a bit later.

Nowadays, “conversion, in particular conversion to Islam, has a political dimension, whether intended by the convert or not” (ix). This is what scholar Willy Jansen (2003) noted in the introduction to a book on the relationship between gender and religious conversion entitled *Women Embracing Islam*. She notes that conversion is not simply an expression of free will, but it depends on specific contexts and power structures. “Conversion is analyzed as a complex social phenomenon rather than only as an individual spiritual transition.” The relationship with gender is that apparently more Western women than men convert to Islam. These statements were made immediately after the 9/11 events.

It is worth drawing attention to the fact that the manifestation of Islam differs from country to country, from region to region, from one continent to another, because of various historical and social backgrounds. This is one reason why studying it in specific cultural contexts has increased over the last decade.

What is the place of literature and poetry in particular in this process of ongoing metamorphosis?

There is a reputed Sirian poet born in 1930, Ahmad Said Esber, better known after his pseudonym of Adonis, who wrote an essay entitled *The Sufi Aesthetic Dimension* (2008). According to Adonis, Sufi poetry “is not a lexical game that takes words as decorative or ornamental materials without emotive or philosophical weight”, but “it is passion and action at the same time”. Secondly, life and existence in general does not mean only physical reality and Sufi poetry means to “see in the tree the interior movement of its root, its sap and its growth” and not only its branches, leaves and fruit. Thirdly, in Sufi poetry the truth is rather “a mystery hidden within things, hidden in their interior world”. (38)

From this perspective, it is obvious that Sufi writing challenges a certain type of cultural outcome produced today by the Western mass media, focused more on appearance and transience rather than on the invisible.

**Poetry.**In a text entitled “By The Grave Of Nahee-bah-wee-quay”, included in *Seven Earth Odes*, a collection of poems from 1972-2003, Paul Sutherland writes about visiting the tomb of a Native American woman, who lived in the nineteenth century and was known for being a spokeswoman for the Ojibwa tribe and a Christian Missionary. His host at that time, in the early seventies, told him about this grave, but she did not know its exact location. What he did was to try to find it and it took him three days. On the third day he noticed a butterfly crossing a road and, just before giving up, he followed that butterfly and found the grave. Later he went there together with his host, in order to plant hollyhock (nalbă) on the Native American woman’s grave. It was in the 1970s, when Native Americans or First Nations were still called Indians.

This is a spiritual story of being guided into understanding otherness. It was also the moment when Paul Sutherland took poetry seriously.

                             un-called-for
came the guidance of a butterfly, and alien figures
                                moved on stones
and fates, uncountable fates,
                                 over-ran our observance,
and without courtship, hollyhocks
                                        rushed upon us

This fragment concentrates two of the principles of Sufism: that of being guided and the need of finding and being found. A Sufi is always in search of meaning, always drawn by mysteries which need to be discovered, always in search of completeness, which, however, is an ongoing process, as it never reaches an end because the world is infinite. In poet Adonis’s words, “writing is constituted in Sufism, and in surrealism, on a language that provokes the desire to search, to question, to know the unknown and to enter the dynamic of the infinite” (32).

The first poem on the handout, which is part of a volume entitled *Spires and Minarets* (2010), may seem evasive at the beginning, especially if one does not know much about the Islamic culture. The title “Find VII: The Beloved” is not a straightforward one. For the uninitiated, “The Beloved” may be a misleading subject. The fact is that I gave this poem to some of my students to translate it into Romanian. It happened that their major was Arabic and I hoped they might have been sensitive to this type of poem, which combines Islamic religion and British natural environment. It was only after some discussion that we realized that “The Beloved” is one of Allah’s names and that a second name, “the Eternal One”, in line 12, is used here as a repetition of the divine figure.

The first part of the title “Find VII” is very telling from a Sufi point of view. The book includes seven poems entitled “find”. The first is about “a plastic hair-band”, which a girl might have lost and the poet feels uneasy about. The next two finds are more or less “nothing”, “nothing” as an ontological concept. The next three finds are closely connected with the poet’s psychological structure: the “playing environment”, which is the fourth find, alludes to the missed rich natural life and music of Canada; the fifth thing he finds is the notion of “grief”, exactly what he experienced after moving to the UK; the sixth poem focuses on “returning the band” to the place where the girl lost it. In conclusion, finding “The Beloved” in the last poem of the sequence suggests there is meaning in what apparently seems nothing, in what is usually belittled, unimportant.

Another notable aspect of the same poem on the handout is its voices. There are at least two visible voices: an initial “I” and an animated scarecrow. (read the poem) The poetic “I” invites and invokes an inanimate object, which he found on his way across the neighbourhoods of Lincolnshire, UK, to speak and invoke someone else in its turn: the divine.
 **The Beloved**

 I ask a scarecrow to speak, if it could, about
the Beloved. It turns its straw head and says:

*Beyond what pain is un-understandable
no further torture exists, not burning bars
but the Beloved’s arms ready to welcome.
Be confused – who’s beloved, who’s you.
Can’t separate; then accept, be bewildered:
a holy state, the blessedness that follows grief.
The Beloved’s already approaching to hold
you between sense and nonsense. Be empty
as my straw legs and head, easily on fire.
Give up on reason, don’t fantasise
you can out-smart the Eternal One
or keep your individual pursuits.
The Beloved will use you like a rag
to change the world you now despise.
What’s beyond indiscernible sorrow, is Love.
Sniff it when you see the blank wall bloom
and try not to name it – rose or jasmine -
just say YOU over and over to the Beloved.*On the one hand, in its primary sense, a scarecrow is used as a frightening but harmless puppet, it symbolizes art, a persona, hence a mask, with a specific role in agricultural rituals, namely that of protecting the crops from unwanted birds. At the same time, it plays an unusual role, representing the scare of cultural difference. The crows can hint at unwanted immigration. It can also be read as the voice of a poetic alter ego and as a powerful example of a Kafkaesque metamorphosis involving surreal distortion and a sense of impending danger. One may wonder what is this for? The answer seems to lie in finding support in faith and spirituality in general.

In a collection of poems entitled *Journeying*(2012), Paul Sutherland maps his geographical and spiritual journeys from Canada, as part of the New World, back to the UK as part of the Old World.

He is the third generation of British immigrants to Canada and, as it usually happens with this generation, they grow up imagining their origins and gradually become interested in where their parents and grandparents came from.

Sutherland’s journey to the UK in 1973 was definitive. It was not just a visit of old relatives living in London. His journey to the UK acted as a cultural shock, which he became aware of only about two decades later, after a first failing marriage, after failing to find a rewarding steady job and after he enrolled at the University of York, where he studied contemporary literature and postcolonial thought.

Going back to school in his forties helped him make sense of his position in the world, of his own split identity, of the gap between cultures in which many fall and are not aware of the advantages of belonging to two or more worlds, in spite of the inherent rejections coming from both or all sides. He published new books and was the founder of a literary magazine entitled *Dreamcatcher*, which still exists today as an international magazine, managed by a younger editorial board. He is now a freelance writer.

What you can see on the handout is part of the poem *Journeying*, the longest poem included in the collection bearing the same title. If we read the beginning, we can notice it starts as a confession that reveals the break with his family and relatives, which he later regretted, but subsequently came to terms with / by writing this book. After the failure of his first marriage, he made an effort to go back to Canada and meet each member of his family, trying to reconnect.

      Thus, “my first home” (mentioned in the second fragment) is conceived as an uprooted entity, as a body in motion, always searching, which defines his identity. (read the fragment) The expression “my first home” is, of course Canada, because he was born there, but at the same time, the poet becomes aware that his first home is the very act of searching and the return itself as an expression of life. It is also a matter of mnemonic reconnection with the past of his ancestors, the past of the United Kingdom and of Europe. Whereas the physical “first home”, Canada, makes its inhabitants feel “homelandless”, the symbolic “first home”, the United Kingdom with its vast imperial history, makes many of its inhabitants feel “shunned” (avoided), as we can see at the end of the fourth extract.

**Journeying**

In that long tradition
I once abandoned my father and mother, left them
bewildered at their beloved land’s failure
to hold their child.
Bereaved, in the frailty of their age,
I’ve denied them a son’s support
and comforting. Over there
nieces, cousins and nephews have matured
in my absence, almost untouchable. […]

I’m a foreigner, constantly coming in.
Yearn to be free
from counter pulls of home against home.
Here, the Empire seeks to repair
the wasted hope of global importance;
but my first home searches beneath reddened sod,
trowels through settlements, vanished relics,
legends, stone-scalloped arrowheads of flint.

We’re  homelandless: First Nation, Palestinian, Colonist, Jew.
Stand in the same middle ground,
locked-in through lamp-strained chamber sessions
where forgiveness can’t reclaim lost history.[…]

There’s a part of Lincolnshire that remains
forever Canadian ( to extend Brooke’s metaphor);
a patch of torn ground perpetually Polish
a spot under shattered branch tops always Punjabi
a privet-watching confine that’s Caribbean.
When de-mobbed, displaced survivors came back,
and other émigrés inspired from imperial-tied cultures,
they were shunned. […]

I hear talk groaning from ethnic fear
blaring distrust of difference
loud as air-raid sirens through an island psyche.
Still the pub quorum blaffers: *They didn’t give them guns*
*at first you know; couldn’t trust them, those Blackies.*An empire of people sought a nourishing core
and found its centre heartless.

For the indigenous
who’ve been spat on as they *linked out* hand in hand
with black or chestnut-complexioned outsiders
who helped rescue this country
once nearly drowned, I record lesser offences.
Near me: a young black girl
wearing the public school image
is still shunned, needs to belittle herself
to find a friend and can’t imagine why.
Awkwardly up from my seat, gathering belongings
the vibrating metal carcass judders to a halt.
My co-travellers look resolutely, the other way.
Stepping off, finding a foothold on the scrappy platform
among the dispersing crowd
nodding to several *excuse me*s,
memory slips. I almost forget all the journey called to mind.
Think only I must pack and travel onwards
— come and visit you, before too long.
                                                              Now I know
my home’s not mine no matter how often I return.

       What the poet does in his search for a home is, in fact, a dematerialization and a deterritorialization of the idea of home, a strategy which can help the individual survive in sometimes unwelcoming conditions.  The very dramatic end of the poem, “Now I know / my home’s not mine no matter how often I return”, speaks not simply about the lack of belonging. He implies that home is always elsewhere. It is a modality of comprehending the infinity of the world, the tiny role of man in the immense universe, one of the characteristics of the Sufi thought. In this context, conflicts generated by ethnic or religious difference and even wars seem like tempests in a tea pot. Of course, the loss can be huge. The difficult role of art then is to transform this loss into possessions, into digestible memory.

The sense of negativity at the end of the poem *Journeying* is also a sign showing the way to Otherness, the readiness to understand and embrace what is usually shunned or avoided. The concept of “negative capability”, introduced by the British Romantic poet John Keats, can explain why a poet labelled Canadian British converted from Christianity to Islam. His work, especially his last three collections, aims at transforming the public opinion regarding the meaning of spirituality and religion in our (British and European) society.

In 2014, Paul Sutherland published a collection entitled *Poems on the Life of the Prophet Muhammad*, which can be understood both as a form of individual attachment to a religion which suits his own psychological mindset, as well as a small step of empowering a religion which many Westerners cannot accept and would rather ridicule.

In this book, the poet challenges English readers’ prejudice against Muhammad, by using a point of view acceptable to many Sunni Muslims. According to the poet himself, the tragedy is that mass media portrays the Prophet in a certain way with the intention not of diminishing Islam but denigrating the idea of spiritual leadership and wisdom which generates respect even passion even love for the “other”. He also wanted to challenge prescribed Islamic views, which deletes all criticism, by using the conflicts and struggles Muhammad had to come to prophet-hood and inspire the transformation of his desert people and bring a new faith into the world.

“The Teller” is one of the poems included in this collection. As in the previous poem entitled “The Beloved”, its voice is plural, although there is only one grammatical “I”. (read the poem)

**The Teller**

I hesitate to write about the blessed man
Muhammad, Allah’s blessings and
peace be upon him, but the pen’s
in my hand and my heart’s moved
and I don’t understand what else to do.
I’m no historian, or holy one myself
too stained by craving and the world,
a recorder with some learning behind
and little thought to be scholarly now.
A wiser mind should write of his truth,
relay his excellence, his perfect manners
that touch like breezes filling a slack sail.
I am a sailor who doesn’t know the sea;
how can I steer a boat across blank scrolls -
where, then, does this longing come from?
He has entered my life with far more than
pitchers of milk, the quiet saint that disturbed
my playing with toys. He’s made my heart beat
differently. I feel compelled to try to follow
his path, that disappears again into mystery,
then changes me once more. No resting
in harbour or oasis. Perhaps I had faith
before but what kind of faith was that?
It seems I knew nothing and now know less;
from where comes my longing to serve?
He has become intimate with me; at will
I might feel him looking over my shoulder.
I wake for night prayers, he’s at my side,
I sometimes believe he’s deep inside me.
Perhaps he will be when I finish my telling ...
though I might wish to be no more than a tree
that could shade him night and day, a great palm
with waving leaves bearing dates to feed him
when he’s hungry. I don’t think I’ll bear him
children, an inheritance, except these words.
I can’t imagine a place in his paradise for me.

             Despite the apparent singularity of the speaking voice, which suits the poet’s confession of faith very well, the poem allows for further identifications. One very important type of identification is that the teller is Aisha, Muhammad’s third wife, the youngest, who played a complex role in the consolidation of Islam as a religion. In the poet’s view, Aisha represents the kind of flashpoint between adoration and critique, given the fact that Aisha is known for her disobedience. The story says that Muhammad first met her when she was still a child and she was crying because her parents scolded her. Then he tried to calm her down and years later he married her and she became his follower.

Of course, other types of identification can emerge from the plurality of doubt and hesitation of this composite voice, which can be the subject of further research.

In many instances, religious conversion involves the existence of a guiding spirit. In Paul Sutherland’s case, this spirit was Shaykh Nazim Al-Haqqani, a former representative of religion at the United Nations, quite well-known in the British Muslim communities. Sutherland became a follower because his second wife, Afifa Emutallah, had already been a follower of the Shaykh for many years. Apart from this influence, Paul Sutherland seems to have a psychological inclination – both inner and learned – of wishing to be guided, to be shown the way, which is an expression of humbleness, because who knows which is the best way in the world?

In his poetry, the image of the mentor has a significant mnemonic function: it represents guidance, the search of the self and of the divine and it is modelled after the figure of the Prophet Muhammad.  (read extracts)

**In The Middle of the Night**

[…]He believed Mevlana’s heart could expand and
hold him in this lit corner, out-encompass darkness;
be a further loop, a mountain necklace, that a dreamer
strolled through unharmed, a band to contain and set a
boundary to any unenlightened abyss. Shaykh’s small,
old human heart’s great out-reach could touch God’s
in-reach: oceanic waves of love drowning the earth.
More than a brushing glance, AW guessed,
intermingled with the Infinite’s breath – a joint
trumpet crying toward us.

As we can see from these extracts, the Shaykh’s persona is associated with the natural environment – the mountains, the ocean and the sea – which echoes the poet’s Canadian heritage and literary imaginary often based on the otherness of the natural world in its most obvious physicality.  The symbol of the ocean is a reference to Shaykh’s own writing collections, entitled *Mercy Oceans*.

The poet’s return to the other as nature is here associated with a traditional, pre-modern type of otherness, taken over by Romanticism, in which the West and the Orient can come together in harmony. Such a return works as a reminder that human beings are not the only beings in the world, which evokes the infinity of the world, a specific element in Sufi poetry.

**Between Tide-Lines**

A boy and his young sister and I struggled between
tide-lines on a North Cypriot, out of season, beach; pebbles
and rotund stones and ‘skimmers’ had been tossed in heaps,
with each step our shoes dug in we gave up half a stride.

We played hide and seek among surf-edged eucalyptus;
with eyes closed, I counted while the two siblings sought
a good hiding place; they crouched behind the boldest trunk
with initials craved high and low in its too tender bark.

Neither made it ‘home free’. In no time, I spied them.
Light dulled; the foreshore moaned; pebbles were muscled
up the beach then forced back into the next wave’s in-rush.
With each blue-turquoise turning a long hissing white

I saw perched, on a sea-ringed boulder, my old Shaykh,
his green turban riffled, his Spring juba buttoned to the chin.
At the core of his world-cuddling love, he sat in seclusion.
I gave distant Salaams and pictured ‘an ocean in an ocean’.

Conclusions not drawn yet… The best conclusion would be inconclusiveness.

***Seven Earth Odes*** (published 2004, Endpapers) is available on Amazon and other virtual bookshops

***Journeying*** (2012, Valley Press) is available from the publisher, Valley Press, UK,
and from various commercial websites incl. Amazon
***Spires and Minarets*** (2010, Sunk Island Publishing) is available in full on the internet under Scribd see:
https://www.scribd.com/doc/29317530/**Spires-and-Minarets**
the poem to which the talk refers, ‘The Beloved’, has been published also in
***A Sufi Novice in Shaykh Efendi’ Realm***(first pub.in a bi-lingual Romanian-English edition, 2014,
Bibliothehca Universalis, in association with Contemporary Literary Horizon
then re-printed in the UK, 2015, in an English only version, Dream Catcher Books).
***A Sufi Novice in Shaykh Efendi’ Realm***is available from the author, Paul Sutherland
***Poems on the Life of the Prophet Muhammad*** (saws) (pub. 2014, Muslim Academic Trust)
is available from the publisher, Muslim Academic Trust,
Central Books and via various virtual bookshops incl. Amazon.

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