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THE OTHER'S POETRY: SUFI THOUGHT IN PAUL SUTHERLAND'S COLLECTIONS

Even the wind wants
to become a cart
pulled by butterflies.
– Adonis

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Abstract: *The influence of the Islamic culture on British literature has had its own tradition and representatives. By drawing on recent sociological, psychological and historical research about conversion to Islam in the West and on studies related to Sufi principles and aesthetics in literature, this paper explores and comments on some of the conditions which can nowadays lead to religious conversions, with a focus on the conversion from Christianity to Islam and on the poetic language of conversion. It argues that certain features of individual identity and an interest in therapeutic solutions to life's problems can favour such once-in-a-lifetime decisions, as Paul Sutherland's transcultural poetry exceptionally illustrates. David Westerlund (2004) writes that "Sufism has always been a multiplex phenomenon" (17), hence its universality and flexibility in its relationship with other cultures and religions. Born in Canada in 1947 in a family of British ancestry, Paul Sutherland arrived in the United Kingdom in 1973. The founder and editor of the international literary journal Dream Catcher from 1996 to 2012, he converted to Islam in 2004, when he became a follower of Shaykh Nazim Al-Haqqani and was given the name Abdul Wadud. He has published several poetry collections inspired by Sufi philosophy, such as Seven Earth Odes (2004), Spires and Minarets (2010), Journeying (2012), Poems on the Life of Prophet Muhammad (2014) or A Sufi Novice in Shaykh Effendi's Realm (2014), fragments of which are briefly discussed below, in the light of a journey from Canadian Christianity to European type of Sufi Islam.*

From a historical viewpoint, the presence of Sufi thought in Western poetry and literature in general is not new, as it can be traced back to the nineteenth century, for example, when great poets such as J. W. von Goethe or John Keats advocated intercultural exchange. In his last work, *West East Divan* (1819), Goethe drew extensively on Oriental literature and the Quran and it is not a coincidence that a new translation – by Martin Bidney – was published in the USA in 2010. Moreover, it is well-known among literary scholars that British poet John Keats conceived a term called 'negative capability'. In his own words, it is "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Colvin 48). Put differently, it constitutes the quality of being receptive in new conditions, beyond a predetermined comfort zone, surrounded by a significant degree of

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the unknown, even to the point of turning into a hostage to those conditions for their own good – all with the purpose of increasing the ontological context. It involves both good intention and reserve, both enthusiasm and self-control. It is the step back made in the attempt to consider something from a broader perspective. The term ‘negative capability’ has such a wide scope that the concept is nowadays endorsed by psychoanalysts, literary theorists, philosophers and social theorists, who explain processes of empowerment (Bate, 2012; Li, 2009; Rogers, 2007; Kinnell, 2005; Unger, 1987, 1984; Fish, 1989).

Given that Paul Sutherland is a convert, it is worth examining 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 his doctoral thesis, Ali Köse (1996) analyzed the social situation of British Muslims and 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 specifically deals with the conversion to Islam through Sufism, making clear reference to Shaykh Nazim (1922-2014), who was born in Cyprus, studied in Istanbul and in Syria and proactively spread the teaching of Islam through the 1970s. Köse’s balanced conclusion implies that personal quest for spiritual life may not necessarily be linked to a specific religion, but it may reside in the attempt to understand the labyrinthine and mysterious nature of the world:

People who are drawn into Sufism are most likely to be from the group of people who have been progressively seeking to master spiritual and/or physical disciplines in order to achieve a state of enlightenment and self-harmony. To achieve this end they got involved in Eastern religions that emphasise ‘inner’ practices as a force for the transformation of the individual, by means of which a true moral agency becomes possible. However, they discovered the view that no such world will ever be found and religious maturity meant learning to live in the complex world. (155)

In the aftermath of the 9/11 events, scholar Willy Jansen (2006) noted in the foreword to a book on the relationship between gender and religious conversion that “conversion, in particular conversion to Islam, has a political dimension, whether intended by the convert or not”. She adds that conversion is not simply an expression of free will, because it depends on specific contexts and power structures and “is analyzed as a complex social phenomenon rather than only as an individual spiritual transition” (ix). Other relatively recent works (Bowen, 2015; Jindra, 2014; Hellyer, 2009; Maréchal et al., 2005) analyze the presence of Muslims in the West from historical and sociological perspectives. Rambo and Farhadian (2014) also state that “conversion establishes new boundaries” (2). The authors provide a list of seven prominent research themes related to it, which suggests an increased theoretical interest in the intricacies of such a controversial topic: the existence of “a wide continuum of points of continuity and discontinuity in order to understand religious conversion”; “the active agency of converts”; “the recognition of the complexity and diversity of motivations that engage

converts in making the changes involved in conversion”; “the language of conversion”; “the recognition of the significance of the human body, the physical place and space in which conversion transpires and that sustains the conversion process”; “conversion careers”; and “the engagement of conversion analyses with historical material” (7). The two editors of *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* especially mention that “Islam has been virtually ignored in conversion studies until recently, and in the fields of psychology and sociology, few studies have been done” (12), which hints at a cross-cultural research deficit regarding the topic over the second half of the twentieth century, when the Western world gained momentum in the context of globalization, increased migration and internet development.

It is useful remembering the manifestation of Islam – as it happens with other religions – 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 and with reference to certain groups and individuals has increased over the last decade, given that converts, who have a certain amount of education in Islam, are often qualified as cultural mediators. Moreover, there may be distinctions among the ways language is used in articulating a religious personality: it is one thing to use language to promote a status quo and another thing when language is employed as a transformative force. In this context, what is the role of literature, poetry in particular, in expressing the change in self-consciousness, which conversion brings about? How does language operate when one travels from one cultural universe to another?

As Syrian poet Adonis (2008) writes, 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 clear Sufi writing challenges a certain type of cultural outcome produced today by Western mass media, focused more on appearance and transience rather than on the invisible.

In a poem entitled “By the Grave of Nahee-bah-wee-quay”, included in *Seven Earth Odes*, a collection started in Canada in 1972 and published in 2004 in the UK, Paul Sutherland describes his visit to 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. In an interview with Monica Manolachi (2015), he remembers that his host at that time told him about this grave, but she did not know its exact location. What he did then 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, his host and the poet went there, in order to plant hollyhocks by 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 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. (6)

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 immeasurable. 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 volume *Spires and Minarets* (2010), which clearly captures the conversion years, includes seven poems entitled "find." The first one is about "a plastic hair-band", which a girl might have lost and the poet feels uneasy about, a pretext to continue on a new quest. The next two finds are more or less "nothing", "nothing" as an ontological concept and a prerequisite of creativity. The next three finds are closely connected with the poet's psychological structure and personal background: the "playing environment", which is the fourth find, alludes to the missed rich natural life and music of Canada; the fifth find is the notion of 'grief', very similar to 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 mere wandering, in what is usually belittled, unimportant. For the uninitiated, "The Beloved" may be a misleading subject. An immediate reference is Toni Morrison's well-known novel, *Beloved*. However, Sutherland's poem blends references to the Islamic religion and British natural environment, in order to evoke one of Allah's names and also a second name, "the Eternal One", in line 12, used here as a repetition of the divine figure:

I ask a scarecrow to speak, if it can, 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".

A notable aspect of the poem "Find VII: The Beloved" above is its voices. There are at least two distinguishable voices: an initial 'I' and an animated scarecrow. The

poetic 'I' invites and invokes an inanimate object, which the poet found on his way across the neighborhoods of Lincolnshire, UK, to speak and invoke someone else in its turn: the divine. 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 fear 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. The symbol may also aim at scaring anxiety and despair away.

In a collection of poems entitled *Journeying* (2012), Paul Sutherland mapped 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 back 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 conscious of only about two decades later, after a first 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. His return to education in his forties helped him make sense of his position in the world, of his split identity, of the cultural gap 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.

The longest poem in the collection, "Journeying", 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" is conceived as an uprooted entity, as a body in motion, always searching, which defines his identity:

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.

The expression “my first home” is, of course Canada, because he was born there, but the poet is simultaneously aware that his first home is the very act of searching and the return itself, as expressions 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”, as stated in the following extract:

There’s a part in 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.

What the poet alludes to 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. The lines imply that home is always elsewhere, whether in a physical place or in memory. 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 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 and the difficult role of art then is to transform it 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 avoided. The concept of ‘negative capability’, introduced by John Keats, can explain why a poet labelled Canadian British converted from Christianity to Islam. His work deftly aims at transforming the public opinion regarding the meaning of spirituality and religion in our (British and European) society.

In 2014, 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, and a small step of empowering a religion which many Westerners cannot accept and would rather ridicule. In his book, the poet challenges 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 portray the Prophet with the intention not of diminishing Islam but of denigrating the idea of spiritual leadership and wisdom which may generate respect, even passion and 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 encounter to come to prophet-hood and inspire the transformation of his desert people and bring a new faith into the world.

In one of the poems included in this collection, “The Teller”, the speaking voice is plural, although there is only one grammatical ‘I’:

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 harbor or oasis. Perhaps I had faith
before but what kind of faith was that? (8)

Despite the apparent singularity of the speaking voice in this fragment, 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. 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 had scolded her. Then he tried to calm her down and years later he married her and she became his follower.

The last question in the above fragment marks the volta of the poem, the key line that takes the reader to an unexpected site. The end of the poem – “I can’t imagine a place in his paradise for me” (8) – supports the idea of always doubting and wondering about human beliefs. Morality is not a given, but a complex, sometimes idiosyncratic, cultural construct that needs constant observation from within. The messenger’s meditation contains seven grammatical negations and several other turns, such as the enjambment “He’s made my heart beat/differently” or “I don’t think I’ll bear him/children, an inheritance, except these words”. The poem is a sample of ‘negative capability’, an approach in contrast with contemporary ‘positive thinking’ that reminds us minus infinite is just another infinite.

In many instances, religious conversion involves the existence of a guiding spirit. In Sutherland's case, this spirit was Shaykh Nazim Al-Haqqani, a former representative of religion at the United Nations, 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, he 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 the best way in the world is?

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 modeled after the figure of the Prophet Muhammad. For example, in “Between Tide-Lines”, the last poem in the collection *A Sufi Novice in Shaykh Effendi's Realm* (2015), initially published in an English Romanian edition, the Shaykh's persona is associated with the natural environment – the mountains, the ocean and the sea:

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. . . .

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'. (87)

These lines echo the poet's Canadian heritage and literary imagination, often based on the otherness of the natural world in its most obvious physicality. The symbol of the ocean is an intertextual reference to Shaykh Nazim Adil's own collections of discourses, entitled *Mercy Oceans* and published in the 1980s. In *Mercy Ocean's Hidden Treasures* (1981), he wrote that “every verse is an endless ocean of meaning” (21), for example.

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 operates as a reminder that human beings may not be the only beings in the universe, which evokes its infinity, a specific element in Sufi poetry. By adopting the ecumenical spirit of the Sufi cult of love, Sutherland follows a tradition supported by Western scholars such as Leonard Lewisohn (2014), the American author, translator and lecturer in the area of Islamic studies, who writes that “one of the key elements of ecstatic experience in Sufi Islam is the intuition of the existence of a higher ‘religion of love’” (55). Sutherland's poetry suggests that although individual beliefs and abilities may have a fractal, unusual, but repetitive nature, they should not be overlooked, especially when they are deeply rooted in someone's character, because they may hint at future changes within the overall ontological system.

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