

J.A. Wainwright

Review Article

Beautiful Winners: A Consideration of Ronald Sutherland's *The New Hero*

Ronald Sutherland promises much in his introduction to *The New Hero*: his proposed subject matter—a discussion of the shared values of French-and English-Canadian culture, the breakdown of the “Old Order” value system and its replacement by an ethic in which the new Canadian hero lives and expresses himself without fear and guilt, indeed an analysis of the relationship between the nature of society and literature—sounds both interesting and exciting. But a few confident lines in that same introduction should give the reader pause as he wonders just how ninety-seven pages of text could be so all-embracing. Sutherland writes, “The essays in this volume are essentially ‘para-literary’, meaning that they examine literature from the viewpoint of social realism and thus often spill over into the areas of psychology, sociology, philosophy, economics, and history.” Obviously such essays would, in such a short space, have to be remarkably informative, concise, and consistent if they were to “spill over” with any degree of integrity and worth. But the term “spill over” itself reveals a rather casual approach to argument, and at times a glib one, that renders *The New Hero*, for all its information and concision, an inconsistent and rather disappointing effort from so eminent a critic. By attempting to deal with so much in five short essays, Sutherland must always leave things out, whether by intention or oversight. In fact, synecdoche might well be considered the main method of argument in *The New Hero* in which the whole of the social-cultural fabric is implied through detailed reference to a part (or parts) of it.

The first two chapters of the book are the most compelling and fulfil some of the promises of the introduction. In “The New Hero”, Sutherland expands on his thesis, first presented in *Second Image*, that there have been different reactions to the Puritan heritage in Canadian and American society with the resultant emergence of a different kind of citizen and literary protagonist. If, in the United States, self-reliance and a healthy opposition of the individual against the dictates of the system (producing an extraordinary and articulated tension) emerged and were documented in 19th- and 20th-century American literature, in Canada “the protagonist blamed himself” and “internalized any tension” because of his great reliance on and control by this same system. The result has been, according to Sutherland, the presence of protagonists in *both* English-and French-Canadian Literature who have had to deal with massive

guilt complexes and with their inability to extricate themselves from debilitating and painful self-analysis and situations. Sutherland uses as his prime examples such heroes as Philip Bentley in Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*, Abraham in Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice*, and Alain Dubois of André Langevin's *Poussière sur la ville*. But, he insists, a new and different hero has come to the fore in an essentially new, guiltless, and self-confident ethos in Quebec and the rest of Canada. Ross's, Wiseman's, and Langevin's latest novels serve to emphasize this new hero's manifestation. Doc Hunter in *Sawbones Memorial*, Hoda in *Crackpot*, and Pierre in *Une Chaine dans le parc* "do not develop guilt complexes", are "not engaged in painful internal struggle and philosophical debate", are not (however beautiful) "losers in the game of life".

I have little argument with Sutherland's analysis of these individual novels; he is, I think, perceptive and, for the most part, accurate in his delineation of what occurs between their covers. What I do question, because his thesis is mainly developed through rhetoric and generalization, is his second chapter "Tabernacles a Douze Étages" and the following statement which represents, after all, the central theme of his entire book: "Undoubtedly he [the new hero] reflects changes now taking place in Canadian society, the new attitudes Representing a profound transformation in the very image of Canadians, the implications of the new Canadian hero could be far-reaching indeed." There is certainly a firm connection made here between life as the matrix of art, on the one hand, and the effect of art on life, on the other. Thirty years ago Malcolm Lowry wrote about the "flow" between art and life, but he was writing primarily about that flow as it existed in the vision of the artist. Whether or not most individuals in English-Canadian and Quebec society are truly seers of or participants in this flow is highly debatable. Sutherland creates the debate and himself arrives at very definite conclusions, but he does not convince this reader that, outside of Quebec at least, the artist seriously reflects the values and attitudes of his society-at-large nor that this society is greatly affected by the artist's vision of things.

In "Tabernacles a Douze Étages" (a line from a militant and despairing poem by Raymond LeBlanc entitled "Je Suis Acadien") Sutherland attempts to explain why cultural nationalism—"rooted in the ethnic group's desire to survive, to preserve an identity, to maintain a set of values and attitudes which produce a feeling of belonging, security, dignity"—has played a more important role in the history of Canada than its counterpart political nationalism—"the desire for power". The latter, Sutherland asserts, has remained, for the most part, the property of the politicians, while cultural nationalism has been nurtured and has developed in the minds and hearts of peoples throughout Canada with a particular and obvious surge of it in Quebec and the Acadian regions of New Brunswick. The crux of Sutherland's argument here is that Quebec has not been isolated by its recent reassessment of itself (its history, religion, future) but rather is now able to appreciate and to participate in a similar reassessment that

is taking place elsewhere in Canada. The vital point, Sutherland insists, is that both cultures have broken with the past; writers, in particular, are viewing themselves and their subject-matter with a new-found confidence and without self-consciousness. Cultural self-fulfilment is evident, and English and French segments of Canadian society are at last (in no small measure due to the separatist movement) aware of and sympathetic to one another's *weltanschauung*. This awareness and willingness to cooperate in which Sutherland believes causes him to proclaim, somewhat grandiosely and naively I think, "Canada, after a long stupor, is now awake and poised to become a viable pluralist society where distinct cultural groups co-exist We have stopped being disciples" (the Québécois of their rigid Catholic-colonial past and English-Canadians of their own Puritan-colonial heritage). It is a wonderful statement redolent of hope, promise, and good; Sutherland, like Jay Gatsby, has "a gift for romantic readiness" that I admire tremendously, but his vision of the end of two solitudes in Canada needs more comprehensive analysis and a wider consideration of reality than these "para-literary" essays provide.

For one thing, I am not prepared wholly to accept his romantic assertion that an artist's ability to break with a tyrannical past and to express himself with new conviction while creating a new hero reflects an essential change in the society in which he lives. It is certainly possible to believe that such a relationship between art and life exists in Quebec. When Langevin writes of his hero in *Une Châine dans le parc*, "He understands that there is a tribe of those who refuse to submit themselves . . . to that which is expected of them . . . another tribe," one feels, whatever the specific thought and action of his novel at this point, that Langevin's words cannot be readily divorced from the present reality of Quebec separatism and the fact that every literate Quebecker would grasp the symbolic import of such a statement. However, I do not accept, nor does Sutherland's method of argument cause me to question my view, seriously, that there is a comparable reality that affects all literate English-Canadians in the same gut fashion.

It is surely valid to note that both Ross and Wiseman place much of their "new hero" novels in the same time period in Canadian history as they did about Philip Bentley and Abraham. Doc Hunter and Hoda may seize the day and become beautiful winners, but they do so, for the most part, in a period in which the society around them adamantly rejects their stance. Even if they do survive into more modern times and mores, they are still outsiders in a society that cannot live according to their codes. Leonard Cohen's choice of a title for his brilliant novel about alternative life and values in Quebec and Canada seems to me to be a more accurate reflection of what goes on around English Canadians. If the revolutionary F. and the ascetic Catherine Tekakwitha are both beautiful losers, at whose hands are they so, and what are the majority of readers who reside between F.'s and Catherine's poles of vision and behaviour? It may be argued that such readers have come a long way since 1966 and Cohen's novel, but Sutherland is too much given to a para-analysis of the Cana-

dian psyche to fill in these twelve years with the convincing portrait of a winner, beautiful or otherwise. Cohen's Narrator in *Beautiful Losers* wonders "What will happen when the newsreel escapes into the Future?" If the newsreel has escaped in Quebec it has only done so vicariously and with reactionary results in the rest of Canada.

I must admit to being somewhat confused by the thematic relevance of the remaining chapters in *The New Hero*. Certainly I can see little if any connection between Sutherland's comments on Canadian war novels in Chapter III and his central thesis. In his fourth chapter, entitled "Thoughts on Five Writers", Sutherland states in an introductory paragraph, "There is no special reason why I should have chosen the five writers to be discussed . . . rather than five others". Surely his detailed analysis of F.P. Grove, Langevin, Gérard Bessette, monologist Yvan Deschamps, and Robertson Davies should be more than loosely connected to the concept of the new hero and cultural nationalism. If not, why are these essays included in a book that cries out for further substantiation of its main argument. Sutherland describes Grove as a naturalist writer through the rather ponderous method of definitions of literary realism and naturalism; but the only link with the new hero I can find in this essay is that Grove was a prophet about Canadian nationalism and had insight into Canada as a pluralistic nation. Otherwise Grove was writing about the problems of the Old Order, about guilt, and about man as a victim of systems larger than himself.

Sutherland then follows his treatment of Grove with an analysis of *Poussière sur la ville* and an explication of the Old Order hero that he has already provided in his opening chapter. Certainly his study of LeBeuf, the man "half-way" between the old and new, in Bessette's *La Bagarre* is relevant to his contention in his first two chapters that Quebec has become a society of self-confidence and self-expression, untainted by guilt and fear, in which a new order and literary protagonist have simultaneously emerged. The inclusion of Yvon Deschamps in a work of literary criticism is a brave move and one that should be applauded, for here at least Sutherland reveals the links between art and life in a detailed consideration of Deschamps's subject-matter and diction. However, Sutherland does wonder if a popular artist like Deschamps can bridge the gap between the populace and "serious literature". The populace and serious literature—are these the two solitudes now? Sutherland, of course, would say not.

Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business* is an important novel for Sutherland's vision of changes in the Canadian cultural scene west (or east) of Quebec. Certainly it is difficult to disagree with his insistence that Dunstan Ramsay, with the help of his "fool-saint" Mary Dempster, overcomes the social and spiritual restrictions of the old Puritan order and delves into the mystery of life. Sutherland's key statement towards the end of this essay emphasizes his position: ". . . Dunstan Ramsay thus represents a remarkable and profound transition in Canadian values, for the observations of seasoned and perceptive writers such as Davies, Ross, Wiseman, and Langevin, among others, would not coincide without reflecting a phenomena of Canadian society itself." Perhaps,

though this again implies a fixed relationship between art and life, and Sutherland obviously believes that the artist's fiction is society's reality. But another, uglier phenomenon still has a place in this country—that which involves the banning of books such as *The Diviners*, *Duddy Kravitz*, and *The Mountain and the Valley*, and no doubt Sutherland's new hero novels as well, from schools and library shelves. The vanguard and rearguard of social and cultural values have always clashed in Canada and in the rest of the world; I see little evidence that the vanguard of artists and thinkers is suddenly reflecting or winning the hearts and minds of the rank-and-file.

The final chapter of *The New Hero* is certainly worthwhile. "Who and what is the Canadian artist?" Sutherland asks as many have before; but his answers, while not startling, do lead the reader back (and on) to a consideration of his main thesis. First of all, he asserts that "pinning a national label on a writer" depends upon "the sphere of consciousness in which he has created his works, the result of his total cultural conditioning and especially of the dominant influences." He then goes on to make a good case for the Canadianism of such authors as Louis Hémon and Georges Bugnet while placing elsewhere Frances Brooke, Brian Moore, Jack Ludwig, and Malcolm Lowry. While I think he (and a great many other critics) underestimate the significance of Dollarton-Eridanus as an alternative to the Mexican-odyssey hell and as a matrix of Lowry's art, the most salient point Sutherland makes in this final essay is that there is a "mainstream" of Canadian Literature that has to do with "the co-existence in this country of two major ethnic or language groups." Though Sutherland insists that his mainstream has nothing to do with literary merit, we have come full circle back to the explosion of cultural nationalism and the emergence of writers, protagonists, and peoples who are involved in "the tension, turmoil, anxiety, soul-searching, and commitment which, unfortunate as the fact may be in terms of tranquil existence, are the stuff of great literature."

For all its para-analytical faults, Sutherland's "new hero" thesis is one thematic interpretation of Canadian Literature that does not seem superimposed nor sprung, wholly formed, from a rigid preconception of what is unfolding in this country. Sutherland is not to be questioned for his insistence on the vital relationship between art and life in Canada but for his failure to convince the reader that a shared vision underlines both art and life. Certain novels are used to support a theory that needs more basis in fact, not speculation, in those areas or disciplines into which Sutherland "spills over" rather than conducts a proper investigation. While it is true that he is a literary critic, Sutherland is leading us away from the old gospel of values and attitudes (though we are no longer disciples). Ninety-six pages is too short for a new Canadian testament.