Radical poetics and transforming poetry culture

Consistently singled out by reviewers and critics as the most important poet of his generation in the UK, Professor Keston Sutherland – poet, editor, critic, reviewer, theorist and Director of the annual Sussex Poetry Festival – has contributed decisively to the UK’s literary avant-garde. His poetry, known for its growth out of and contribution to critical theory and Marxism, has inspired poets to write in radical new styles and has had a transformative impact on international literary culture that has been compared with that of TS Eliot.

Overview

The Odes to TL61P is a suite of five ‘massive, turbulent, tender and satirical’ odes, a ‘dedicated love song’ to the product-ordering code of a now obsolete Hotpoint tumble dryer. Among other things it has been described as a ‘wild work of revolutionary theory’ that investigates in minute detail the difference between commodities and human lives. Like much of the work of Keston Sutherland (Professor of Poetics at the University of Sussex), The Odes to TL61P makes original, theoretical arguments about life under capital.

Known for its growth out of critical theory and Marxism, Sutherland’s poetry is saturated with research into literature, philosophy, theory and history. In all his work, he closely tracks and illuminates the transmission of words and ideas through history, producing subtle and highly detailed accounts of the growth of modernity and capitalism.

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Steven Critelli, Critic

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Achieving impact

The transformation of the literary field is not an easy thing to demonstrate. Yet there is a virtual consensus among critics and reviewers that Keston Sutherland’s work has transformed poetry culture and inspired a proliferation of previously unimagined new experiments in form and argument. Critic Steven Critelli writes: ‘I know of no contemporary poet in the US (or the world) who has attempted to portray our cultural plight in so comprehensive and symphonic a style of writing … Yes, by this I mean to put Sutherland in the class of Eliot, Joyce, Pound, Bellow.’

Sutherland’s impact stretches beyond impressing critics and influencing academic and professional poetry circles by exerting a significant impact on practising poets and on the wider poetry-reading public. His influence has been especially powerful on practising poets and he has been singled out as the leading poet of the ‘New British School’, reinvigorating literary culture in the UK. His work has shaped the writing and performance of both emerging and established poets, and a survey presented in the introduction to the anthology of young British poets, Better than Language (2011), found that the majority of younger poets represented claimed Sutherland as the most significant influence on their work.

Sutherland’s poetry has also influenced academic curricula internationally and has impacted on the experimental poetry scene. His work is taught at many universities in the US and the UK (including the University of California, Berkeley and the Universities of Chicago, Sheffield, Cambridge and London). Additionally, as an editor of Barque Press and through prolific publication of his work he has helped create a new culture of poetic experiment and dialogue.

Since joining Sussex in 2004, he has brought more than 100 poets to read on campus and at Brighton’s Nightingale Theatre. Sussex is now recognised as a hub of cutting-edge poetry in Britain. Sutherland’s poetry has also influenced academic curricula internationally and has impacted on the experimental poetry scene.

Finally, Sutherland’s work has wide impact and public appeal. He has been singled out by articles in The Guardian and The White Review as having major influence on the ‘public life of poetry today’. His books of poetry have sold more than 3,500 copies in the last five years, in a market where most single-author collections sell fewer than a thousand. His work is also frequently published in anthologies, most recently in Dear World and Everyone In It (Bloodaxe 2013), and translations of his poetry have appeared in Chinese, Czech, Dutch, French, German and Greek. In addition, there have been significant public performances of Sutherland’s poetry, contributing to the public appreciation and understanding of his work. He is regularly invited to read at literary festivals and universities, both at home and abroad, and his readings online attract around 1,000 viewers within weeks of being uploaded; a performance of Hot White Andy was viewed on YouTube by 10,818 people by July 2013.

Future impact

Sutherland was the Holloway Poetry Fellow at the University of California at Berkeley in 2013, and will be a visiting poetry fellow at Princeton in 2015. An edition of his collected poems so far will be published by Enitharmon in 2015. His forthcoming critical work includes a collection of essays on Marx and poetry and a complete edition of the prose works of JH Prynne.