Jean Sulivan and the Mystical Moment

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The French priest-writer Jean Sulivan (1913–80) is not a name that would immediately spring to mind for a book dealing with mystical theology and French thought. Sulivan is a sadly neglected author in the country of his birth, especially when one considers that he managed to publish 10 novels, two short story collections, several book-length essays and an important spiritual journal, *Morning Light*, the majority of which carry the imprint of the prestigious Gallimard publishing house. He also wrote countless articles and reviews in newspapers like *Le Monde* and *La Croix* and was a well-known figure in Rennes, where he set up a cinéclub and a highly successful cultural centre. Under these circumstances, one would expect him to attract far greater critical attention than he has done to date. Knowledge of his work is even more limited outside France, in spite of the welcome appearance of a number of his books in English translation.

Irrespective of this neglect, I find his spiritual quest intriguing because of the manner in which he traces an interior journey that undoubtedly owes much to the mystical tradition, which is the particular focus of this chapter. Although he was described as an author capable of following in the footsteps of Bernanos by Jacques Madaule – writing in *Témoignage chrétien*, in April 1964 – Sulivan was determined to put distance between himself and the Catholic novel. He outlined his reasons for this in his literary credo, *Petite littérature individuelle*:

> But whether it is that genius cannot be imitated, because former cultural and religious signs have become outdated, they can only communicate with a public living in the past. Spiritual heirs are either out of touch or else forced to renew themselves and follow a new direction, or else indeed to return to silence.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) The author of this chapter has written numerous newspaper and journal articles in French and English on Sulivan’s work in addition to publishing a monograph, *Jean Sulivan (1913–1980): La Marginalité dans la vie et l’œuvre* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2008).

Sulivan consciously sought something different to his illustrious predecessors, Mauriac, Bernanos and Julien Green. The early decades of the twentieth century mark the apogee of the Catholic novel in France. When Sulivan began publishing his novels at the end of the 1950s, he knew that the spiritual climate in France was greatly transformed. Hence a writer of Christian inspiration like him needed to develop a new language capable of reflecting a changed metaphysical landscape. This was a time when existentialism was the dominant philosophy in France, and it tended to be at best sceptical about the notion of an all-loving God who could allow the suffering and death of innocent children, for example, or the mindless mass murder that occurred in the Nazi concentration camps or elsewhere during two bloody world wars.

The new novel was also an emerging literary force notable for its jettisoning of traditional language, plot and characterisation. Nathalie Sarraute captured the prevailing climate well when she coined the phrase 'l'ére du soupçon' – the era of suspicion. There were, in fact, increasingly few accepted truths; everything was subjected to rational analysis, critique and deconstruction. The student riots in May 1968 were in a sense the culmination of a seething discontent with the religious, business and educational ruling elites of the time.

In such a fraught atmosphere, it is not altogether surprising that the Catholic novel, in spite of the fact that Mauriac and Green were still alive and writing, no longer had the same hold over a reading public that had become apathetic towards organised religion and disillusioned with heretofore commonly accepted belief systems. Sulivan came late to literature, being 45 when his first novel was published. He quickly acknowledged the therapeutic effect it had on him: 'Writing is a wound of humanity and words are like a flower that grows inside it.' Literature became a way of living out his priestly vocation, a means of prolonging the 'breath' of the Gospel with all its paradoxes and calls for uprooting and rebirth. As is common on the Christian path, his interior trajectory was not without pain and suffering, but in time this could paradoxically open onto something luminous: 'Those who don't understand in flesh and in spirit that sadness is also joy, have never lived outside of a world of appearances and have never written, no matter how widely they have published.' As his work evolved, Sulivan began to abandon the classical style of the writers of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* who had so impressed him at the beginning of his career, and to see that inner conversion was the path to self-fulfilment. Equally he came to realise

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3 It is interesting that Sulivan was born in the same year as Albert Camus and that they shared the same publisher, Gallimard. They also had to endure the death of their fathers in the Great War and subsequently demonstrated fierce devotion for their mothers, simple women who were largely incapable of understanding the complexity of two such intellectually gifted sons.


5 *Petite littérature individuelle*, p. 22. Italics in original.
that traditional language was incapable of conveying in an adequate manner the moments of intense interior conversion that take hold of his characters.

In my discussion of the mystical moment in his writings, I am acutely aware of just how difficult it is to define in exact terms what the main ingredients of mysticism are. Louis Gardet argues that its ultimate goal is to achieve 'une expérience fruitive de l'absolu' (a fruitful experience of the absolute).6 Such a definition, while useful, needs further elucidation. Le Dictionnaire de Spiritualité explains that what we refer to as mystical is that which goes beyond the structures of ordinary experience. As the etymology of the word suggests, the mystical life is hidden, mysterious, inviting one to blot out the exterior world in order to be more receptive to an interior reality. It requires a good deal of discipline and self-knowledge, a willingness to test one's limits and to accept one's fragility. Patrick Gormally argues that the mystical dimension of Sullivan's writing has no inherent need to express itself, and that it ultimately ends up becoming a language of silence. He continues:

[His] writing reveals and examines instead the void of the soul, this gaping wound that one so easily covers up with ideologies and obsessions, including the illusion of success.7

As we will see, many of Sullivan's characters are wounded by life and find themselves, either by choice or by force of circumstances, on the margins of society. Rebel priests, prostitutes, drug addicts, tramps, down-and-outs, people with psychological problems, these are the types of individual one meets in his novels and short stories. It was his belief that such people lead a more vibrant inner life than those living comfortably at the centre of society. In his interior journal, Morning Light, we read:

As soon as circumstances make it possible, try to break out. Earn less, resign. I'm not telling you to absent yourselves or to be content with simply watching the caravan of sadness, but to be present differently.8

As can be imagined, very few would be comfortable following such radical advice, which partly explains the disquiet engendered by Sullivan's demanding approach. He acknowledged that he stopped short of divesting himself of all material possessions and living the life of a tramp. His role was different; he would

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write about the transformation that takes hold of those who find themselves at rock bottom and come to appreciate what it means to walk in Christ’s footsteps. He described how he took a step back from literary notoriety at an early stage of his career. In his memoir *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, he wrote: ‘I had no desire to paint pretty pictures, to add polish to what I was saying so that people would remark, “This guy has some serious talent. Jesus, do you see the way he writes!”’ Instead, he looked for something with more depth:

I preferred books that had a bit of everything, that were difficult to grasp and that permitted you to lose yourself in order to find a new you. In them I would hear the untamed interior voice that cries out in every human being, a heartbeat, a sign of life. You are not meant to admire these books but to start afresh because of them.9

His own books correspond to this model, being both ‘difficult to grasp’ and containing that ‘untamed interior voice’ that is so characteristic of everything he wrote.

Joseph Lemarchand (Sulivan’s real name) was born in 1913 in the Breton village of Montauban. He lost his father, a tenant farmer, in the trenches of Argonne in 1916 and subsequently transferred all his affection to his mother, a woman of deep and simple faith who had no choice other than to remarry in order to maintain a reasonable standard of living for herself and her son. The latter had great difficulty accepting what he viewed as a betrayal. In *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, we read:

I know that mother is getting married today. I must be feeling shame, fear and emptiness. When I look back on it now, I feel nothing. But I know that for years I carried a deep scar inside me, a scar that wouldn’t leave me and to which I couldn’t even give a name.10

Sulivan saw himself as a ‘fils de tut’ (the son of a dead man) and the pain of having his biological father replaced by a stranger who, he felt, relegated him to second place in his mother’s affections, was intense. Religion was an important part of his childhood and, following in his uncle’s footsteps, he entered the junior seminary at a young age and was ordained a priest in 1938, much to his mother’s delight. She was not quite prepared for the unusual view of priesthood her son would espouse, however. As early as during his seminary education, he developed a rebellious reputation: his nickname ‘le curé rouge’ can be attributed to his socialist leanings. He found the method of teaching theology arid and unquestioning. In order to do well in exams, you were expected to toe the party

10 *Anticipate*, p. 52.
Clericalism was imbued in the young recruits from an early stage:

Our teachers thought they were detaching us from the outside world, opening us out to God's pure love. They were also feeding our pride, that most terrible unmentionable pride that goes so far as to use God Himself.11

He resented the Church's obsession with the legalistic side of religion, which seemed at a remove from the Gospel's concern with love of oneself and of one's neighbour. He described his religious upbringing in Brittany thus:

The priests of this time tended to preach about laws and obligations. In this way they had succeeded in transforming Christianity into something approaching a natural religion. They had forgotten about freedom, without which there is no real faith.12

His mother, whom he visited every weekend while working as a teacher in the diocesan school in Rennes, was very happy to follow the Church's teaching on all matters of conscience. But increasingly Sulivan found himself grappling with how to find an authentic role for himself in the Church. In the end, thanks to the understanding of his enlightened superior, Cardinal Roques, he was released from pastoral duties in order to concentrate on his writing. One wonders if Roques ever regretted this decision, given the provocative nature of Sulivan's writing, which was scathing of several defects within the institutional Church, especially triumphalism and the blind pursuit of power. His books slowly began to attract a loyal following as he developed a conversational tone which demanded the reader's participation for it to operate successfully. He laid bare his doubts and anxieties, presented characters who were at a crossroads in their lives and were forced to take key decisions that would determine their future happiness. He formulated a unique literary style that 'chose' a certain type of reader, one who was prepared to turn his back on the comfort of a good salary, social esteem and material possessions in order to achieve a dynamic inner life. We read in Morning Light: 'To write is to enter into silence, to speak in a low voice for the few who enter into silence with you because they recognise a voice that is rising up out of themselves.'13

In Sulivan's view, one should not be afraid of being uprooted – after all, Exi is the call that Christ made to his apostles, meaning 'set out,' 'go forth,' do not stand still. Christ was the great wanderer, the one who understood the transient nature of this life and the inevitability of death: 'If I don't go away, the Spirit will

11 Anticipate, p. 56.
12 Anticipate, p. 52.
13 Morning Light, p. 22.
not come', he stated on more than one occasion. Sullivan was sympathetic to the problems caused by God's apparent absence:

To find the word that would simultaneously communicate presence and absence, wounding with joy. If God were too easily present, how would we have managed to hold him back? Mystics know that God becomes presence in his absence.\textsuperscript{14}

The apparent 'absence' of God is often the prelude to the 'dark night of the soul', an important dimension of mysticism.

A good example of how a certain number of Sullivan's characters benefit from this type of mystical awareness of God's presence in His absence is provided by \textit{The Sea Remains}, the 1964 novel that won for its author the \textit{Grand Prix catholique de littérature}. It describes the spiritual reawakening of a cardinal, Ramon Rimaz, who discovers towards the end of his life that he has betrayed his primary vocation, that of serving the poor, to become a notable, a member of the social and ecclesiastical hierarchy. In his retirement villa beside the sea, he contemplates his 'glorious' career and recognises that self-absorption and power had caused him to neglect the inner life. In a moment of revelation, which closely resembles what will happen to Sullivan in India, Rimaz has a 'presentiment of some unbelievable joy', which makes him wonder if he is on the threshold of death:

The evidence had been given to him that it would suffice, not to will it, but simply to let himself go, to follow the route that had been opened into the depths, if he wished to pass to the other shore. But what route?\textsuperscript{15}

The vocabulary employed in these lines has a strong mystical dimension. The cardinal becomes receptive to a force which guides him 'into the depths' from whence he might eventually 'pass to the other shore'. The rebirth he undergoes is possibly what prompts the decision to take the place of a political prisoner, Monolo, whom he helps to escape by exchanging clothes with him during one of his visits to the local prison. This symbolic act results in the cardinal being left to rot in jail, a fate that allows him to identify closely with the victims of society, a group to which he wishes to align himself once more.

There is another important moment in \textit{The Sea Remains} in which the cardinal marvels at how he never properly mourned his mother's death because his busy schedule resulted in what he refers to as the 'petrification' of his soul. He recalls how awkward the poor woman felt during her one visit to the archbishop's palace; he now suspects that she probably sensed how far removed the opulent

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Morning Light}, p. 75.

furniture and the ecclesiastical robes were from the real message of the gospel. The terms used to describe how the cardinal feels are once more ambivalent: he had a 'revelation of something indefinable – a void or a fullness' and afterwards thinks that 'he could be master of life or death'. Once more, there is evidence of language's shortcomings when it comes to conveying moments like these. The narrator, who feels at liberty to comment freely on the cardinal's reactions, expresses his frustration:

How I wish I could describe his stare of happiness! But did he ever know that he was happy? And I'm condemned to see only from afar, to nourish myself on my own fervor, to demonstrate, to betray with words what was beyond discourse.

Much of what happens to Sullivan's characters is 'beyond discourse', and yet words are the only medium he has available to him. That is why one occasionally encounters ellipses and lack of punctuation when something ineffable takes place: the style in this process reflects the experience, whose intensity surpasses the capacity of mere language. The narrator attempts to analyse what exactly happened to the cardinal before his decision to overturn the beliefs and proprieties that had governed his life for such a long time, but he can only surmise that something profound had taken control of him that he could not keep in check:

Perhaps he had tried at first to recall remnants of old sermons that still cluttered his memory: for the words end up assembling themselves on their own; all you need to do is call on one for the rest to follow, and you think you're saying something. But by that time mere verbal associations seemed a lie to him; words were at our disposal, but the link between words could only be interior, new each time; truth has to be defined in the depths of a consciousness.

There is much to ponder in these lines that evoke the dichotomy that exists between words and meaning. Sullivan appears to be of the view that truth is only to be found 'in the depths of a consciousness', often refined by pain and suffering, never apt to reveal itself in intellectual posturing and clever jargon. Ramon Rimaz must wait for a lifetime to pass by in order to truly see himself and the world for the first time. He is appalled at what he perceives, and yet he knows that this vision is a necessary part of his mystical journey, The Sea Remains, therefore, is a well-constructed, thought-provoking novel that underlines Sullivan's many talents as a writer. He would subsequently regret accepting the prize from the

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16 The Sea Remains, p. 44.
17 Ibid.
Catholic Establishment, thinking that it placed him in a category that didn't suit his particular artistic bent. A few years later, he wrote of his embarrassment on the night of the awards' ceremony in *Anticipate Every Goodbye*:

You're nothing but an impostor! You describe a cardinal who turns his back on his exalted position within the Church to follow a more humble path [...] And you, the writer who brought this cardinal to life, you dare to show yourself thus in public, to lap up all this praise.\(^{19}\)

Up until this point, Sulivan's novels had been completely ignored by the Catholic press, a fact that caused his mother some anxiety. His main motivation in accepting the award was to allay her fears, and at the prize-giving he was mindful to thank his collaborator, Daniel-Rops, for the pleasure a complimentary article about him in *La Croix* would give his mother. Being feted by the Catholic literary clique made Sulivan uneasy, however; he had no desire to become part of a cosy circle. It is noticeable that after *The Sea Remains* Sulivan deliberately moved away from a form of literature that concerned itself with favourable criticism and enhanced sales. His style became jerky and one has difficulty differentiating between the narrator, the author and the characters. In his most challenging novel, *Joie errante*, for example, he addressed the following challenge to his readers:

Your anxiety moves me. All these comings-and-goings in space and time. [...] You would like an accomplished book which would grab you by the throat! I don't want to lie to that extent. Why should I allow myself to be carried along by the mechanics of a plot? Why should I extend for you this trap, while I hide behind the smooth rampart of literature, totally unblemished, watching you look at yourselves, delighted with my posturing?\(^{20}\)

Sulivan is turning away from a detached, objective form of narration, well-constructed characters and classical story-lines in favour of a numinous language that breaks the logical sequence in an attempt to capture what occurs during moments of mystical insight. But in order to understand this development, it is necessary to be aware of two events that impacted significantly on Sulivan's spiritual evolution.

The first occurred during a visit to the French Benedictine Henri le Saux's ashram in India in the 1960s. India at this time was a magnet for celebrities such as the Beatles and for others who spent time there in the hope of unravelling the key to inner peace. Sulivan had heard a lot about le Saux, who

\(^{19}\) *Anticipate*, p. 87.

took the name Abhishiktananda and attempted to live like a Christian Hindu monk by employing, among other things, meditation as a means of prayerful communication with God. He adopted the Indian mode of dress (a cavi, or one-piece gown) and went so far down the path of Hinduism that some questioned his Christian credentials. Sulivan underwent a conversion on the banks of the river Kavery, which flowed alongside the ashram. Afterwards, he came to the conclusion that the West was far behind the East when it came to spirituality. On his return from India, his half-brother, Maurice Récan, had difficulty recognising the writer when he went to collect him at the airport. He stated that he was ‘a different man’, like someone who had been transformed by an inner secret. The book he wrote about his stay in India, *Le plus petit abîme*, is revealing of some of Sulivan’s discoveries, especially his encounter with advaita, or non-duality, which, according to the writer, is at the core of Hindu spirituality. Becoming one with God is not easily achieved, and it cannot be willed into being. It requires ridding oneself of worldly concerns, being alert to the signs of God’s presence and mindful of one’s interior life. When describing his conversion, Sulivan once more has difficulty finding the words to convey what exactly had happened to him. He is forced to call it simply ‘Cela’, or ‘it’, a force that drags him down into ‘obscure caverns’ where he has the inkling of an otherworldly presence:

Suddenly the thing is there, bounds forward, takes your breath away, twists you, a wave of panic shakes you like a tree, leaves you bereft. You have the dizzying intuition of contingency, of the unimportance of everything, of the void. At the same time an inexpressible joy unfolds and takes hold of you [...]. It is necessary to sit down, submit to what is happening, so severe is the jolt.  

In a similar way to what happens to Ramon Rimaz in *The Sea Remains*, Sulivan would never be the same after this moment of rebirth. He had done nothing to initiate what had happened to him – such experiences come without warning – but he was aware that it was a significant stage in his spiritual evolution. On his return to France, the second key moment, the death of his mother, would occur.

It is obvious from his memoir that Sulivan was extremely attached to his mother, whom he looked on as a refuge, a haven to which he returned every weekend. Her fierce attachment to Catholicism was a decisive factor in her son’s vocation. He dreaded the thought of what life would be like when she was gone. The news that she had been taken ill reached him as he was being photographed in the apartment of one of his friends for a magazine that wanted to do a profile of him. When he finally arrived at the hospital, he was appalled by the rash on her face and the obvious discomfort she was experiencing. From the initial diagnosis of food-poisoning, things deteriorated quickly as kidney failure set in.

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To compound matters, she also underwent a crisis of faith, which left her son in a state of turmoil: 'My mother had no religion any more', he wrote. 'Already, in Rennes, when I showed her the crucifix on the wall, she would turn her head away. She refused to take the rosary beads that had never left her side throughout her life.' Sulivan was unable to provide any succour to his mother in her hour of need. As she made her ascent to Golgotha, he watched on, helpless, wondering how a woman with such strong religious beliefs could find herself in this spiritual desert. Then it dawned on him that the greatest challenge to faith is one's facing the prospect of eternity. That journey into the unknown has to be made alone: answers to the mysteries will only be found on the other side of the threshold and it is natural to experience fear and doubt in such circumstances. His mother eventually accepted her fate, but Sulivan was left bereft as he contemplated her corpse. In the end, he managed to change his pain into joy:

You become totally relaxed in death. We are all blind thinking that life consists of possessing material goods, holding onto this, then that, getting to know one thing, then another, trying desperately to ignore the fact that the whole process inevitably amounts to absolutely nothing. Life isn't a game where you have to possess and know as many things as possible. Rather, it is about reducing yourself to zero, living in a new and more authentic way.

This is precisely what Sulivan did after his mother passed away: he faced up to the reality of death and came to appreciate the importance of living the moment, of 'reducing yourself to zero', of being available to others at all times. The impact on his writing was immediate:

The death of my mother allowed me to detach myself radically from the folklore of religion, which is useful and even necessary in certain conditions, and made me a wanderer [...] I resolved to do nothing to mask the emptiness and to keep myself as far as possible from the pious circus.

The novels that follow this revelation contain characters who undergo deep spiritual upheavals that change the way they understand existence. Eternity, My Beloved (1966) relates the story of Strozzi, based on a real-life figure, Auguste Rossi, who came to Pigalle during the German Occupation and worked there until his death some years later. The prostitutes around this area of Paris become his special flock, and he has to endure doubts in relation to his strange ministry from his superiors in the religious order, the police and the 'respectable' lobby.

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22 Anticipate, p. 110.
23 Anticipate, p. 114.
24 Morning Light, p. 12.
who find it unacceptable that a priest should compromise his reputation by consorting with ‘fallen’ women. Sulivan is attracted by the singular witness that Strozzi provides, and admits: ‘He lives what I just talk about.’ The writer’s mission is to record the way in which Strozzi’s presence in Pigalle impacts on the lives of those with whom he comes into contact. On one occasion Strozzi admits to the narrator (a thinly disguised version of Sulivan) that prayer became natural to him, ‘a true link of friendship, the day he became part of his neighborhood in Paris.’ The testimonies of women like Piquerette and Elizabeth show how he restores their faith in men and, by extension, in the Church of which he is the sole representative in their eyes. Piquerette says that he was: ‘The first man who had ever looked on her as a human being [...] Everything probably starts from this point: self-respect becomes possible again.’ Elizabeth goes even farther:

It’s as if he were making love to you without his realizing it – and without your realising it either. But it lasts. You feel like forgiving everyone that ever hurt you. You’d like to pour out on others the love that he has given you [...].

In Sulivan’s estimation, Strozzi lives out the Gospel message of unconditional love. He is aware of the suspicions that his strange ministry evokes, but he continues his presence among this marginalised group of women without a second thought for the possible consequences. Eventually he is called to appear before a committee to answer the reports that have been made about his irregular conduct. The Cardinal hesitates between anger and admiration and wonders: ‘Who is this Strozzi? A saint, an eccentric, a poor wretch who needs the scum of society to help him breathe easily, a prophet?’ He thinks he could achieve a lot if he had a number of men like him; just having one makes it a lot more difficult. In the end, the decision is taken to allow Strozzi to continue in his ministry, but he will no longer receive any financial support from his order. He heads back to Pigalle, delighted that his faculties have not been removed. Unlike Ramon Rimaz, Strozzi does not undergo any obvious conversion: his is a more gradual progression towards illumination.

Joie errante is Sulivan’s most obscure book. Written after a four-year silence during which he suffered from a sentimental crisis, it opens with the memorable line: ‘I have struggled for a long time in the dark trenches of despair.’ The narrator, Blaise, is recovering from a botched love affair with a woman called Imagine which has left him wounded and in pain. His travels bring him to various

26 Eternity p. 15.
27 Eternity p. 31.
28 Eternity p. 61.
29 Eternity, p. 78.
destinations, most notably North Africa and Manhattan, places also frequented by Sullivan. In Manhattan he meets Géri, who is herself recovering from the pain of a failed relationship with a Vietnam veteran and former seminarian, Joss, a university lecturer whose apartment attracts all sorts of social misfits: tramps, drug addicts, people with psychological problems. He fritters away his salary on these people and then leaves the beautiful Géri to look after Linda, an unreliable drug addict who deceives and robs him at every turn and whom he nevertheless nurses with love. He explains his devotion to Linda in a letter to Géri:

I never met anyone as impoverished as she was. She has crossed the spiritual desert. No one but I can help her to live and to die. To unconditionally assist a single human being to survive – it sometimes seems to me that this is sufficient to justify an existence.30

Joss is one example of the many Sulivanian characters who choose to align themselves with the downtrodden and the marginalised. Blaise correctly remarks that Joss is living out a parable with his life. He tells Géri that it is necessary for him to leave her in order for her to find a happiness that requires her being open to others and becoming acquainted with the inner workings of her soul.

The pain Sulivan underwent in the four years prior to the publication of Joie errante is evident to anyone who reads between the lines of a disjointed and confusing narrative. There is a new tone in this novel, one that conveys the idea that there are no longer any absolutes, no clear distinctions between good and evil, sin and grace. Each person must make his or her way through a labyrinth that is full of darkness and uncertainty. When one emerges from the maze, one discovers that it is necessary to start the search all over again because when we stop searching, when we become immobile, there is no chance of an authentic spiritual life. This is why Sulivan always exhorts his readers to find their own answers to the dilemmas that life throws at them. Towards the end of Joie errante we read: 'I have written this entire book while in the throes of pain. Take the joy that is flapping its wings within these pages and pass it on quickly: otherwise it could wound you also.'31 Pain and joy, light and darkness, mystery and revelation, all these mystical elements are strongly embedded in Sulivan's writing. He has the humility to admit that he does not possess any ready-made answers; that readers have to grope in the darkness of despair, as he did, in order to glimpse the glimmer of light that sometimes appears at the end of the tunnel. In terms of the definition of mysticism provided earlier in this chapter ('a fruitful experience of the absolute'), I think that Joie errante is perhaps the best example of how this might be achieved. The outside world becomes secondary to this fierce desire to accede to a higher plane where one might experience a more intimate knowledge

30 Joie errante, p. 260.
31 Joie errante, p. 278.
of self and of the controlling force that lies beyond the threshold of death. At a certain point, language is an inadequate tool to represent the powerful inner conversion that takes hold of people like Blaise, and perhaps Joss, but it is the only medium with which Sullivan can operate. In fact, literature provides him with a particularly important vehicle to explore certain mystical ideas and experiences, such that his writings represent a further dimension to our understanding of what actually constitutes 'the mystical' in French thought.

2013 marked the centenary of Sullivan's birth. I trust this important anniversary will serve as the springboard for a re-evaluation of his contribution to twentieth-century French Christian thought and that he will finally get the recognition he so richly deserves. Victim of a hit-and-run accident as he emerged from one of his interminable walks in the Bois de Boulogne in February 1980, his prophetic voice is as relevant today as it was over three decades ago. The mystical charge is what gives his writing a quality that transcends time and place. I will conclude with one final quote from Morning Light: 'There is no spiritual life which does not encounter deception and disillusionment, suffering and confusion.'32 Meister Eckhart et compagnie would not argue with that evaluation.

Bibliography


32 Morning Light, p. 103.