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## An Introduction to the Life and Works of Jean Sullivan (1913-1980)

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE AND WORKS OF JEAN SULIVAN (1913-1980)

Eamon Maher

This article was prompted by an invitation from the editor of *Studies* who wished to mark the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the French priest-novelist, Jean Sullivan. Ten years ago, I had my first piece on Sullivan published in this same journal, and so we are dealing with a dual anniversary<sup>1</sup>. Sullivan was the author of ten novels, several essays, two collections of short stories, numerous book reviews and articles in *Le Monde* and *La Croix*. In addition, he was the editor of a successful local newspaper, *Dialogues-Ouest*, to which he contributed articles and editorials. He also ran a highly successful cinéclub and cultural centre, while he was a priest teaching in the Catholic lycée of Rennes following his ordination in 1938. In spite of his considerable output, Sullivan (a *nom de plume* – his real name was Joseph Lemarchand) is largely neglected in his native France. Only two critical studies of his work are currently available and the first of these was published in 1981, just after his death. As we enter the third millennium, however, Sullivan's voice has lost none of its originality. His claim, in the 1970s, that the West was the Third World of spirituality, in spite of – maybe because of – its technological and material superiority over continents like India and Africa, is even truer now than it was three decades ago.

Readers of Sullivan will be disappointed if they expect him to supply ready-made answers. He urges people to uproot themselves constantly in order not to fall into the trap of smug complacency. He warns against letting the social mask obscure the inner void, against being judgemental of people who refuse to conform to norms. Above all, he encourages us to be prepared to take risks. He described his own literary quest in the following terms: 'To write is to set out, rejecting the language of the tribe, enrooting oneself elsewhere. Hence it is necessary for the writer to consent to become a stranger, to forget what he knows, to run the risk of losing his friends, to not be afraid *to lose his audience* just when he begins to have one'<sup>2</sup>.

In order to understand how Sullivan came to formulate his peculiar approach to literature, a brief look at his memoir, *Anticipate Every Goodbye*<sup>3</sup>, provides insights into his childhood during the early decades of the last century in what was still a very Catholic Brittany. He lost his father in the course of the Great War (1914-1918) and spent the early years of his life alone with his mother, who was a simple Breton peasant of deep faith. When she was forced to remarry in order to hold on to her small farm, the young boy was inconsolable. He spoke of the experience in moving terms in an interview with Bernard Feuillet: 'There is always one image that comes back

to me. Crying, I run on a pathway through the fields. Why am I late? I have no idea. I arrive at the house – it's my mother's wedding. She isn't dressed in white as it's her second time to get married. She is also crying as she comes over to me. [...] My writing has been a constant attempt to cure myself of this scene. The death of my father, the remarriage of my mother have marked my whole life'<sup>4</sup>.

**Many of the characters in Sullivan's novels are broken and wounded by life.**

Writing was his form of therapy. Later, he realised his mother had no choice but to remarry. But for the little boy dressed in his sailor suit (an attire reserved for special occasions), seeing his mother marry a man who isn't his father was a cruel psychological blow from which he would never fully recover. In the subsequent treatment of his novels, we will observe the preponderance of characters who have been wounded by life and we will see how this is a direct result of Sullivan's own exposure to suffering at an early age. When it became apparent (to his mother's great joy) that the young man wanted to become a priest, he was sent to the diocesan college and then on to the seminary. He looked on his formation as a 'Purgatory'. He disliked the rote learning and the desire of his superiors to prevent the seminarians from having their own opinions on any theological issues. Even then, he was different, more cerebral, more searching than his colleagues.

After ordination, he was sent to Rennes and from there he went to visit his mother every Sunday. For most of this period, the two were alone again: the second family had scattered. The son wondered what life would be like when she eventually died. This thought haunted his mind every time he passed the village tower and reached the local cemetery. He 'anticipates' the time when he will walk at the front of her funeral cortège. He finds the thought terrifying: "One day the shutters will be closed. Everything's all right this time round. I can make out mother's shadow moving about through the curtains'<sup>5</sup>. He looks on his mother as his refuge, his strength. Her simple faith, a faith so different from his own, was what had inspired him to become a priest. He did not conform in any way to her notion of how a priest should behave. He rarely donned clerical dress and was extremely active in cultural activities. He also raised many issues about the way the Church was being managed and he had difficulty finding a worthwhile role for himself within its structures. At a certain stage in his career, he no longer wanted to pander to his audience by giving erudite sermons (he was a particularly adept preacher) which would draw appreciative compliments from his congregation but change nothing in their religious mindset. As he grew older, he realised that he was wearing a mask. The hero of his award-winning novel, *The Sea Remains* (1964), Cardinal Ramon Rimaz, comes to the same painful conclusion regarding his ecclesiastical career: "To have spoken all his life of

an eternal life, to have ordained thousands of priests to announce it, to hold in his hands each day the... And now to stand there dry as a stick. Unbelievable. Everything happened outside me, I was on exhibit”<sup>6</sup>.

With power had come ‘petrification’ (*The Sea Remains*, p.81) and a move away from the Gospel’s message of rebirth.

Sullivan was awarded the *Grand Prix catholique de littérature* for this novel about the conversion of the Spanish cardinal. His motivation for accepting the prize was largely a desire to alleviate the anxiety his mother harboured in relation to his writings. *The Sea Remains* was Sullivan’s third novel and up to that point there had been almost total silence about him in the Catholic press, a fact that worried his mother.

***He sets out to produce a modern-day Gospel parable that presents new challenges: “The type of readers I want are those who say: ‘This book, this page, changed my life’”.***

Winning the prize would ensure that there would be favourable mention of him in papers like *La Croix*, which his mother read assiduously. Afterwards, he felt as though he had betrayed his original vocation by becoming a member of the literary establishment. His emotion at the prize-giving ceremony is caused by his belief that he is an ‘impostor’, a hypocrite. His reaction has always struck me as being excessive. The novel, although it won an award from the ‘Catholic’ literary establishment, was in no way an apologia for the Catholic Church. If anything, it condemned the latter for its failure to be loyal to Christ’s example of humility and spiritual impoverishment.

During his mother’s illness and death, Sullivan made some discoveries that would have major repercussions on how he saw his role as a writer. When the news reached him that she had been taken ill, he was being photographed in the apartment of one of his friends for a magazine that wanted to do a profile on him. He couldn’t wait for the photographer to finish so that he could rush to her bedside. When he finally arrived at the hospital, he was appalled at the rash on her face and he saw her in all her fragility for the first time. He was told initially that she had food-poisoning; finally, that she was going to die. As if this wasn’t bad enough, he also witnessed her momentary crisis of faith, as she reacted vehemently against her fate: “My mother had no religion any more. 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”. (*Anticipate*, p.110).

Her agony of doubt bordering on despair was her prelude to death – the type of spiritual crisis not unknown among saintly people. This was not at all what her son had expected. How could this happen to her whose faith was so strong? No words of comfort from him, the priest, the beloved son of her first marriage, could do anything to ease her pain. He felt totally inadequate: ‘Only at that precise moment did I realise that she was going to die, that she was replacing Christ on the naked cross, experiencing all the feelings of abandonment. I could see her eyes – I couldn’t, I wouldn’t read what they

were saying. I would only know later.’ (*Anticipate*, p.111). This spiritual desert is one that is often encountered by Sullivan’s characters, who are broken and wounded by life, who take the place of Christ on the naked cross. Sullivan himself suffered greatly at his inability to comfort his dying mother. Significantly, he took no formal part in the funeral ceremony and chose to wear dark sunglasses to hide his tears – he didn’t want to make a spectacle of his suffering. As he explains: ‘The funeral was all about appearances. I had said goodbye a long time ago. [...] I will hold out until the curtain falls. Then the two of us will be alone, mother. I will bring you off with me, you will follow me everywhere.’ (*Anticipate*, p.115).

The death of his mother was clearly a major turning point in Sullivan’s life as well as in his literary career. After this event, his novels become fragmented, full of ellipses, and the narrator intervenes frequently to comment on the actions of his protagonists. It is as though the whole literary process, with its traditional impartiality and authorial distance, is being called into question. *Eternity My Beloved* was the first novel he published after her death and it marks a clear change of approach from that used in *The Sea Remains*. It tells the story of a priest, Strozzi, who is based on a real-life figure, Auguste Rossi, who came to Pigalle during World War II and remained there until his death some years later. The prostitutes who populate this area of Paris become his special flock and he has to endure many doubts in relation to his ‘mission’ among such marginalized women from his superiors, the police and the ‘respectable’ lobby. Sullivan admits his preference for characters like Strozzi: ‘He lives what I just talk about’<sup>7</sup>. He is attracted to this type of Christian witness from a literary perspective also: ‘Frankly, that’s the kind I like. The ones who have no family or folklore. All human love is snatched from them, tossed into the unknown, the solitude grafted into their hearts is so profound that their only hope is flight or an immense love’<sup>8</sup>. Note the conversational style here, a style that invites the reader to engage in a sort of dialogue with the narrator – this becomes increasingly prevalent in the novels subsequent to *The Sea Remains*. The characters undergo a deep spiritual upheaval that changes the way they look on their existence. Afterwards, it is as though they have entered a new zone where words are no longer capable of expressing what is happening to them. The precarious nature of Strozzi’s priesthood, his decision to risk all in order to help the prostitutes who are his friends, makes him one of the characters who are most dear to Sullivan.

From this point on, characters who are thinly disguised representations of people whom Sullivan knew in real life become the norm. Increasingly, the writer shuns the type of narrative that will cause his readers to admire the ‘form’ and ignore the content. With Strozzi, he had the type of raw material that would have lent itself to producing a highly successful book: “I could have made up scenes, livened things up; it would have filled up hundreds of

pages. My publisher would have been delighted – a sure best seller. Strozzi, we could have made something out of all this craziness’ (*Eternity*, p.83).

The lessons learnt from the awards ceremony for *The Sea Remains* were not forgotten. Sullivan was determined never to fall into that trap again. He believed that in many instances ‘successful’ writers, those who enjoy big sales, have often betrayed something essential. His own literary project would be to write for the few who were capable of changing the way they lived. What readers get out of Sullivan’s writings is dependent to a very large extent on their preparedness to capture the breath and the tone of his style, a style that is similar to what we find in the gospel parables. You have to be sensitive to all sorts of hidden layers of meaning. He consciously set out to reproduce a type of modern-day parable in which the polished literary style that had initially appealed to him becomes secondary to a mystical movement that opens up new vistas and presents new challenges. In his interview with Bernard Feuillet, he stated that what he wrote ‘chose’ his readers and established a kind of ‘connivance’ between them and the author: ‘I am not talking about those people who love literature as such, but rather about those who don’t seek to appreciate a writer on purely literary grounds, or to find out what sort of style or technique he employs. The type of readers I want are those who say: “This book, this page, changed my life.” I have my share of clients in every corner of the country’<sup>9</sup>.

Happily, because of the increasing number of his books now available in English translation, these ‘clients’ have spread beyond an exclusively francophone readership. It could be argued that this preoccupation with helping his readers to live in a world that seems increasingly devoid of meaning indicates that ethical concerns are more important to him than aesthetic ones. It is not, however, so simple. When Sullivan’s characters undergo moments of mystical intensity, normal language is an inadequate tool to convey the experience. He explained his evolution in *Morning Light*: ‘The polished objects crack, my fine passages get all mixed up, and a word emerges that breaks the harmony’<sup>10</sup>. The word of which he speaks has much in common with the Word: it is tantalising and enigmatic, open to a variety of interpretations. It is not so much concerned with formal beauty as with authenticity. A brief look at what is his most challenging novel, *Joie errante* (1974), the penultimate one that he published, will show how the theory was put into practice.

*Joie errante* (*Wandering Joy*) was published after four years of silence, which interrupted the annual output from when he began writing novels in 1958. The opening line reveals the emergence from a period of deep suffering: “I have struggled for a long time in the dark trenches of despair”<sup>11</sup>. The narrator is called Blaise, a name used also to designate the narrator of

*At the end of the later novels, no answers are given: just silence. The reader is pushed to give an ending to a text that is left deliberately unfinished.*



*D'amour et de mort à Mogador*<sup>12</sup>, and, like his predecessor, he is trying to recover from a failed love affair with a woman called Imagine<sup>13</sup>. His travels bring him to various destinations, most notably North Africa and Manhattan, places also visited by Sullivan. He meets the woman who will change his life, Géri, in Manhattan. Géri is herself trying to recover from the pain of a failed relationship with a Viet Nam veteran and former seminarian, Joss. Rather than give us any real access to the inner workings of his characters, Sullivan relates a few anecdotes as to how they interact and teach each other important lessons about life. Joss works as a university lecturer and his apartment in Manhattan is full of misfits of all sorts: tramps, drug addicts, people with psychological problems. He fritters away his salary on them and finally leaves the beautiful Géri to devote his life to Linda, a nymphomaniac drug addict who deceives him at every turn and whom he nurses with love. He attempts to explain his behaviour in a letter he writes to Géri: 'Linda crossed my path at a moment when I didn't know where I was headed. It's difficult to understand... I don't fully understand myself. I had never met anyone as impoverished as she was. She had crossed the spiritual desert. No one but I could help her to live and to die. To unconditionally assist a single human being to live – it sometimes seems to me that this is sufficient to justify an existence'<sup>14</sup>.

Such selflessness is rare indeed. Joss is an example of one of the many Sulivanian characters who chose to align themselves with the downtrodden and the marginalized. Blaise correctly points out that Joss is living out a parable with his life. He tells Géri that it is necessary for him to leave in order for her to find happiness, a happiness that is located deep within her soul. Strozzi is another character who appears again in this book. This time we learn that he has slept with a woman who demanded that he supply her with concrete proof of his love. But I am talking about the characters in a way that might indicate that we are dealing with a traditional novel, which is far from being the case. We do get some snapshots of what is happening in the lives of the people who inhabit the book, but there is no real plot and the narrative is interspersed with observations like the following: 'When you reflect on something lyrical, the realisation comes to you that there is as much spirituality in these places [*the streets in New York where the sex industry thrives*] [...] as in all the pilgrimages you might go on; that morality begins at the point where you cannot distinguish any more between joy and an orgasm. Sex and the Cross are really close to one another, pleasure and pain, the revelation of the infinite and of the limit, of void and plenitude'. (*Joie errante*, p.231).

What strikes the reader of *Joie errante* is the complex nature of the spiritual paths that are followed by people like Joss and Strozzi. There are no longer any absolutes, no clear distinction between good and evil, sin and grace. Each person has to make his way through a labyrinth that is full of



darkness and uncertainty. When he emerges from this maze, he discovers that he must start his search all over again because when we stop searching, when we become immobile, there is no longer any authentic spiritual life. That is why Sullivan always exhorts his readers to find their own answers to the problems existence throws at them. Towards the end of *Joie errante*, he writes: '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'. (*Joie errante*, p.278).

***There are no longer any absolutes, no clear distinctions between good and evil, sin and grace. Individuals make their way through a labyrinth that is full of darkness and uncertainty.***

One short example of the breakdown of language transmits something of the confusion of which Sullivan speaks. It is a great pity that no English translation of this novel is available but, like the problems Beckett encountered with his French translation of *Finnegans Wake*, any translator would have difficulty putting into English the following lines written by Sullivan (I know that my own attempt is unsatisfactory). We are very much in the stream of consciousness genre: 'Newspapers bring to your attention cardboard boxes or wooden ones mattresses torn open sound of a car exhaust while clothes are stuck on naked bodies like damp vestments on Greek statues words and gestures obliterated torn clothes wailing sirens a child's buggy goes flying down the stairs hope the kid isn't impossible to understand oh shit'.. (*Joie errante*, p.184).

This postmodern chaos, with its calling into question of what was previously considered an understandable and explainable reality, is very evident in Sullivan's later work. Language is strained to its limit: no punctuation, a lack of temporal linearity and of clarity, these are features of this experimental novel. Sullivan refuses to make logical what is illogical: namely, life, with its rhythms and sounds, its joys and sorrows, the way the mind jumbles up images and memories. When read aloud, this sort of passage makes more sense than in the written form – it is not unlike *Finnegans Wake* in that respect. Sullivan seeks to provoke his reader with comments like the following: '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'd hide behind the smooth rampart of literature, totally unblemished, watching you look at yourselves, delighted with my posturing?' (*Joie errante*, pp.135-6).

These lines reveal distrust of literature, or at the very least a suspicion with regard to a certain interpretation of literature, which tries to present a clear image of a world in crisis. He knows that he has a slightly paradoxical attitude because he refuses to employ a detached, objective form of narration, well-constructed characters and classical story lines. There is no logical

outcome at the end of his later novels, no answers: just silence. This void pushes the reader to stand in for the narrator in order to give an ending to a text that is left deliberately unfinished. Like an Indian guru (he spent time in an Indian ashram during the 1960s), Sullivan tells people to look for answers within themselves and not to look to him for spiritual guidance. His writings are one great poem because he believes that the poetic function of art can reveal the spiritual meaning of things, by extracting from the apparent chaos, from the unfathomable absence, a harmonious image of the world. The symbolic can thus render visible the invisible, by going from disorder to order, from emptiness to fullness, from the unformed to the formed.

I think that Sullivan is a writer whose life and works (it is difficult to differentiate one from the other) are palatable to people who have experienced pain and doubt in their lives – and who has not? - and who are prepared to follow Sullivan into a maze of mystery and doubt. It is possible that nothing but darkness will meet us in this labyrinth, but there is a chance also that we will find some illumination. One thing is sure, however: the quest will not be simple or comfortable. How could it be from a writer who summed up his approach to literature this way: ‘Writing, in a way I cannot fully grasp, is a wound of humanity, and the word is a flower that grows inside it, imperceptibly’<sup>15</sup>.

Sullivan’s death in a hit-and-run accident in February 1980, as he emerged from the Bois de Boulogne on one of his interminable walks, deprived us of a prophetic voice. Fortunately, this voice lives on in his writings.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “The Christian Novelist in an Age of Transition – A Case Study.” In *Studies*, Vol. 82, No. 326, Summer 1993, pp.140-147. I will attempt to avoid, in so far as is possible, any unnecessary overlaps between the two articles.
- <sup>2</sup> *Morning Light The Spiritual Journal of Jean Sullivan*, trans. Joseph Cunneen and Patrick Gormally (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 8. The italics are Sullivan’s.
- <sup>3</sup> This is the title of my translation of *Devance tout adieu*, which was published by Veritas in 2000. All page references will be to the Veritas edition.
- <sup>4</sup> *L’instant, l’éternité. Bernard Feuillet interroge Jean Sullivan* (Paris: Le Centurion/’Les interviews’, 1978), p.36.
- <sup>5</sup> *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, trans. Eamon Maher (Dublin: Veritas, 2000), p.10.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Sea Remains*, trans. Robert Donahue and Joseph Cunneen (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 7-8.
- <sup>7</sup> *Eternity My Beloved*, trans. Sr. Ellen Riordan (Minnesota: River Boat Books, 1998), p.97. (Please note that the four works by Sullivan currently available in English translation have now been cited in notes 2, 5, 6 & 7).
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

- <sup>9</sup> *L'instant, l'éternité*, op. cit., pp.14-5.
- <sup>10</sup> *Morning Light*, op. cit., p.100.
- <sup>11</sup> *Joie errante* (Paris: Gallimard/Folio, 1974), p.7. The translations from this text are my own.
- <sup>12</sup> *D'amour et de mort à Mogador* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970). This novel tells the story of how Blaise, a journalist, after the end of an affair with a married woman, Lucie, and being laid off by his newspaper because of his independent stances, heads to Morocco. Here he meets two women, Ruta and Delphine, the latter being the woman at the heart of a murder trial on which he reported. She had killed her lover and the guilty verdict and life sentence handed down to her had struck the young journalist as being unjust.
- <sup>13</sup> There is confusion between Blaise and Sullivan, to such an extent that it is at times difficult to decipher whose voice is being used to narrate the events that take place.
- <sup>14</sup> *Joie errante*, p.260.
- <sup>15</sup> *Petite littérature individuelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p.21.