Spiritual Essay

To lie a little less

The literary vocation of Jean Sulivan

Joseph Cunneen

Paradoxes and contradictions

THE LIFE AND WORK OF JEAN SULIVAN (1913–1980) contain a host of paradoxes and contradictions. A French priest who wrote thirty books – half of them fiction – he remains virtually unknown in the English-speaking world. Neither a philosopher nor a theologian, he offers no formulas for personal spirituality or church renewal, but soon after his death the Dominican-run Editions du Cerf included him in their series on 'contemporary spiritual witnesses'.[1] After his third novel, *The sea remains* (1964),[2] was a commercial and literary success, he received permission from the Archbishop of Rennes to be relieved of all pastoral duties, but always remained a priest, never more so than when getting up at dawn to compose the meditative snap-shots of his 'spiritual itinerary', *Morning light*.[3] Although as a young man he dreamed of literary glory, hoping to emulate the polished writers published in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, after winning the Grand Prix Catholique de Littérature for *The sea remains* he disappointed the traditional Catholic public by refusing any official role, and adopted a more fractured and personal style.

Sulivan is not a great novelist; though there is an ironic and impassioned quality in his voice that has reminded critics of Bernanos, none of his books is the equal of *Diary of a country priest*. On the other hand, sustained by letters from readers who said he had given them the courage to go on, sometimes at moments of near despair, he writes for a post-Christian world. Reading his work, many who had suffered from a religious education that emphasized sin and punishment discovered, beneath their pain, a secret joy that savoured of the gospel.

From peasant childhood to Parisian anonymity

Jean Sulivan is a pseudonym, borrowed from Preston Sturges' film, *Sullivan's travels*, which he encountered when running a film club in Rennes. He was born Joseph Lemarchand in Montauban, a small village in Brittany, and began to use his adopted name only in 1958 when he began to publish. The loss of his father in an early battle of World War I undoubtedly had lasting effects, but he writes with lyricism of his peasant childhood, his close relationship with his pious mother and with nature itself. Entering the local seminary as a teenager, he was soon in rebellion against its mechanistic psychology and intellectual aridity, but with the help of a friendly professor he expanded his reading beyond classroom manuals to Kierkegaard, Marcel, Congar, and those who were preparing a theological renewal that came to prominence after World War II.

Following ordination in 1938, Sulivan spent more than twenty years in Rennes, serving as a student chaplain, directing a lecture centre, editing a monthly review, and running the film club. But these myriad cultural activities made him feel he was living on the surface of things. He had always wanted to write, and the publication of his first novel – significantly titled *Le voyage intérieur* – was an act of liberation. 'I was born', he told an interviewer, 'when I was forty-five.' The stream of books that followed shows the inner compulsion behind his work; writing entailed a practical asceticism and a rejection of conventional Catholicism. As he says in *Morning light*, 'I write in order to lie a little less'.

Fortunately, Cardinal Roques recognized this special vocation, freeing him to devote himself full-time to his writing. After the success of *The sea remains*, he accepted an assignment to do a book on India. The result, *Le plus petit abîme* (1965), is no tourist guide, but a personal journal, with sketches of Indian life and visits to Hindu temples interspersed with reflections on the meaning of priesthood. A leap in self-knowledge is presented in a more relaxed, less polished style. The second half of the book recreates his encounter with Henri Le Saux, the legendary French Benedictine whose ashram drew heavily on Hindu spirituality and who confirmed Sulivan in his vocation. There are even hints of a near-mystical experience: 'I was born', he says later, 'on the banks of the Cavery.'

A further shock, the death of his mother, which is the central subject of his autobiographical memoir, *Devance tout adieu* (*Anticipate every goodbye*, 1966), finally uprooted Sulivan from his childhood village. A

remarkable fusion of nostalgia, humour and tenderness, the book registers his shock at the news that his mother has been rushed to a modern impersonal hospital. The affectionate relationship between mother and son, which he remembers as always unspoken, is deeply affecting. She who knew the parables by heart and was surely an influence on his entering the seminary dies in intense pain, refusing the 'consolations of religion' her priest-son tries to offer her. It was a shattering experience, teaching Sulivan that one must learn 'how to surrender an image of God that has become too familiar'. After his mother's death, Sulivan left Brittany and settled in a run-down neighbourhood in Paris, where he wrote steadily until his death after an automobile accident in 1980.

An absence that is also a presence

The sea remains had been hailed in part because it conformed to the near-classical style of its time. A poetic study of the awakening consciousness of a Spanish cardinal who has retired to a fishing village, it embodies one of Sulivan's favourite injunctions, the necessity of taking off one's social mask in order to recover the secret springs of childhood. Rámon Rimaz comes to realize that he has given his energy to the externals of religion: 'Everything has happened outside of me'. He no longer holds the trappings of office; now he sheds the decorations that remain, and tells his housekeeper to burn his scrapbooks. He finds a new freedom in the absence of power, and a chance acquaintance with a boy on the beach opens the way to an extraordinary act of generosity.

Sulivan suggests the workings of the invisible world through the complex interplay between narrator and author. In *Morning light* he speaks of his desire to write a book without ever mentioning God but which would leave the reader with a hunger for the absolute. In *The sea remains* the narrator finds himself in the area after Rimaz has disappeared, and interviews those closest to the Cardinal in order to piece together what happened. Perhaps the most important 'witness' is Minka, who looks after the little boy who made friends with Rimaz, and asks the Cardinal to intercede for an imprisoned labour leader.

An abstract painter and a refugee who had been victimized by the brutality of war, Minka offers an important clue to Sulivan's novelistic intentions. Although her painting is a transcription of deep suffering, it is also the record

> of an unbelievable joy [that] starts to live within her . . . In her first sketches a cross would sometimes be seen in profile through the grill, or springing up from tortured trees among the masks in delirium; but very quickly she even abandoned the cross, instinctively knowing that she should hide her secret because the wound as well as the joy must be born not out of the representation but of the relationships themselves, out of the painterly surface.[4]

Sulivan's respect for the Christian mystery leads him to speak frequently of an absence that is also a presence, like the absence of the cross in Minka's later paintings.

The award for *The sea remains* with its resulting hour of media attention, followed by the trip to India and the death of his mother, made Sulivan recognize the emptiness of literary glory. Later books adopt an increasingly fractured style and a readiness to share his own encounters, sufferings and discoveries. Sulivan's first novel after his mother's death, *Eternity, my beloved*,[5] is the product of his encounter with Augusto Rossi, a maverick priest whose unofficial 'parish' is made up of the prostitutes, petty thieves and conmen of the notorious Pigalle district.

Strozzi, the central character, is a former seminary rector who falls between the cracks of both Church and state during the German occupation of World War II. The book's materials, which could easily have been a pretext for sensationalism and fake piety, are treated with subtlety and delicacy. The narrator involves the reader in his own search to uncover Strozzi's secret: 'It would be worth knowing what I'm really after: the fleeting truth of acts or the reality of new birth that takes place in the midst of events, a joy that is more like a wound'.[6]

The narrator says that he originally intended to write a conventional novel about Elizabeth, a former prostitute whom he had met in a village near the Mediterranean, but she kept talking about Strozzi. 'Strozzi stole my novel,'[7] he complains. The novel gains added richness by linking Strozzi's career to the beginnings of Abbé Godin's work and the priest-worker movement, in the years when Archbishop Roncalli – later to become Pope John XXIII – was papal nuncio in Paris. Its central thread, however, is the narrator's desperate effort to determine whether Elizabeth is a fanatic or Strozzi's serenity is genuine.

The appeal of *Eternity, my beloved* is certainly not that of a neatly constructed plot leading to a dramatic climax. Sulivan avoids big scenes, cuts away when pathos looms and leaves the reader to flesh out the details of quickly sketched situations. The narrator, accustomed to

explaining motivation in terms of the mechanism of desire, finds it hard to understand Strozzi's virtue, especially after the latter concedes that 'a man, in order to be a man, has to meet with a woman who will bind him to the world'. But, Strozzi continues,

> Why does it necessarily have to be knowing in the flesh? . . . There has always been something stronger than desire, a question: how could I, Strozzi, be of service to all the others? Don't laugh. One woman isn't enough for me. That's it – I want to be available, free. For me, you see, the sexual relationship has a metaphysical value . . . I feel it in my flesh. It's not a moral idea, not a law, but a basic fact.[8]

As with Minka's abstract art in *The sea remains*, it is the absence/presence in both narrative and style that reveals Sulivan's Christian imagination. When Pâquerette, a young woman Strozzi has encountered by chance, suddenly blurts out that she is a streetwalker, he registers no shock. They have a drink and go to a movie; while Jean-Louis Barrault mimes the action of *Les enfants du paradis*, Strozzi lightly rests his arm for a moment on her shoulder:

> The first man with whom she had ever walked and talked who did not brush against her and touch her, did not try to deceive her, and did not lecture her – which is really just another way to touch and deceive you and treat you like an object.[9]

Sulivan understands such non-judgemental openness in terms of the divine self-emptying revealed in the Incarnation.

A fractured style for a broken world

Subsequent novels adopt an increasingly fractured style in which the lines of division between genres are as fluid as the voice of the narrator. In *Les mots à la gorge* (1969) Daniel Dorme, a talented actor who toured France performing profound poetic and dramatic texts, turns to a career in journalism to please his wife. He achieves a degree of success with a large-circulation newspaper but is dismissed when he insists on defending a powerless victim of police brutality. His marriage collapses, he spends time in a psychiatric hospital, and ends up as a tramp, but remains unembittered, feeling a strange sense of liberation.

The novel begins with a first-person narrator, Dorme himself, but this soon gives way to the blended voices of narrator and main character. 'The author allows this penetration of the subconscious by the narrator

in order to give the impression that Dorme has graduated to a new way of seeing and expressing things.'[10] Again there is no neat ending, no demonstration of a 'moral', but *Les mots à la gorge* echoes Sulivan's preference for outsiders and rebels and his criticism of social forces devoted to power and the rule of quantity.

Sulivan's later fiction includes short stories in *Miroir brisé* and *Je veux battre le tambour* (1975) that are like scenarios for readers to fill out. In 'Kid Zero' a young woman near suicide seems to find joy as she reaches a final stage of detachment;[11] in 'Gloria' a disillusioned young woman who believes she is no longer a Christian has a sudden vision of God the Father while caring for an elderly bearded alcoholic,[12] and 'Fidèle Felix' presents an ex-priest who achieves inner peace as he cares for a wife who is repeatedly unfaithful.[13] Effects are achieved with quick near-telegraphic strokes, transitionless alterations of mood, and a vocabulary that embraces the latest Parisian slang. Though the style becomes increasingly broken, Roger Bichelberger's observation remains valid:

> Jean Sulivan's 'histoires' (stories) are nothing less than parables from what might be called the Fifth Gospel, written about the everyday lives of believers and non-believers in today's world. These parables tell of people who, overwhelmed by the essential truths of life, subsequently attempt to live by those truths. For this they become signs of contradiction who are rejected both by society and their families.[14]

Two other late novels should be mentioned (and translated into English) if Sulivan is to get a fair hearing from English-language readers as a writer of fiction: *Joie errante* (1974) and *Quelque temps dans la vie de Jude et cie* (1979). Paradoxically, though the world of these books is no longer explicitly religious, both have at their centre mysterious priest-like figures who offer examples of inner strength, independence and disinterestedness.

In *Joie errante* Blaise, the narrator, visits New York while recovering from an unhappy love affair. The action shifts abruptly; we are sometimes in Paris, and there is a remembrance of Cardinal Spellman blessing US troops in Vietnam. The latter is provided by Joss, a Vietnam veteran and former seminarian, in whose New York apartment Blaise meets hippies, addicts and alcoholics. Joss leaves Géri, a woman who loves him deeply, to take care of Linda, who is dangerously drug-dependent, because the latter has greater need of him. Blaise and Géri become close friends and reflect on Joss's example.

Dominated by interior dialogue, presenting a disjointed narrative that refers to events lived in succession by different characters, *Joie errante* calls for a detailed study of criss-crossing themes. There is a series of film-like dissolves in which the characters emerge and disappear as the reader gets hints of their interior journey. Blaise becomes able to look at himself through the 'broken mirror' of the lives around him, and the experience becomes a process of liberation, nourishing his desire – and perhaps that of the reader – 'to be born again', the last line of the novel.

Sulivan's last novel, *Quelque temps dans la vie de Jude et cie*, is equally complex but perhaps succeeds better in communicating the fragmentary quality of everyday life. Again there is no simple beginning and end, just a series of moments, suggestive incidents in the lives of a band of temporary squatters in a run-down neighbourhood. Only at the end do we learn that Jude is a priest, but if he is the group's animating centre, there is no attempt to edify us – we see their contradictions and weaknesses. Nevertheless, *Jude et cie* has profound insights on community which would be liberating for those who do not think of the Church simply as an institution. Sulivan's bias comes through in the very title: as soon as we want to turn Jude's group into some kind of model, we realize that this effort to create a life together is inevitably provisional, just for 'quelque temps'.

There are young people on the run, ex-prisoners, women who have been abandoned, but Sulivan isn't exploiting destitution for cheap pathos; his is a world of insolent poverty, menaced by an unholy alliance of promoters and civil authorities. Fierce irony alternates with gruff compassion. Mathieu, who has spent twenty years in gaol, becomes a friend of Jo, the auto thief. Jude helps rehabilitate buildings that have been judged unhealthy so that their present occupants won't be thrown out in the street. Gerda tells Boris, 'I would like to be with you in eternal life'. And Boris answers, 'You will be, if you are here'.

The gospel vs ideology

Although Sulivan's emphasis on the reality of joy in the depths of suffering can easily be related to his sympathy for outsiders, his work cannot be annexed in the name of any ideological agenda. Nor can he be placed in the camp of any group offering their analysis of the 'crisis in the church today'. Indeed, such discussion seems mostly empty rhetoric, since

> The minority Church that now exists in the Western world is much closer, in Sulivan's estimation, to the model that Christ established. Triumphalism, glory, authoritarianism, have all been eroded to a large extent and people now have the opportunity to undergo a freely-chosen spiritual rebirth.[15]

Both individual growth and a revisioning of authority, he insists, require a relinquishing of power and radical selflessness, an imitation of divine self-emptying. The lesson has been internalized in his own writing, which shows a progressive stripping of stylistic indulgence; *Morning light*, his spiritual journal, and later untranslated non-fiction works like *La traversée des illusions*, *L'écart et l'alliance* and *L'exode* are increasingly aphoristic.

These books are endlessly quotable but offer no philosophical thesis, no theological breakthrough, no formula for church reform. Instead, they repeat his powerful criticism of the recurring temptation to reduce the gospel to one's favourite ideology, along with praise of 'an active doubt that hunts out prejudices and every kind of idolatry'.[16]

L'exode, published just after his death as a kind of testament, shows the profundity of Sulivan's mature spiritual understanding:

> Faith is ebbing. Many men and women today say they have had enough of God.
>
> But no one who has had any experience ever has *enough* of God. Unfortunately, specialists and officials, through their everyday teaching and vulgarization of faith, have succeeded so well that whole areas believe they have had enough of God. The God of whom people have had enough is not God. While justifying our 'disbelief', these would-be experts have forced us to go where public transport would never take one. Theirs is a tragic role: they are both delegates of the message and charged with keeping it in check. A great deal of humility is required which is why my criticism is accompanied by respect.
>
> What a ball and chain prayer has long been to so many, imprudently presented as a duty! So many genuflections, endless repetitions, and hackneyed phrases offered to the omnipotent Father! It was less a matter of addressing God than of conditioning and convincing ourselves. But really, if you were God you would be neither so fussy nor susceptible. Wouldn't you be tired out by all that empty and obligatory bleating? Instead, you would be humble, you would abandon omnipotence in order to become friend. And would God be less generous than your pretentious imagination? But why speak of imagination? Jesus realized the impossible to imagine by breaking with dualism.

> Certainly infantile distress never leaves us and secretes the need to be protected. 'Agony,' Freud says, 'confronted with the risks of life, is appeased by the thought of the benevolent reign of Providence.' Faith takes advantage of this basic mechanism, but is also its victim when discernment is lacking. Weariness in prayer and 'loss of faith' follow. When God neither responds nor protects, he becomes useless. For we forget that he is also the unpredictable-unknown who, by remaining silent, makes us responsible beings, equals and even friends, both in absence and pain and in presence and joy.[17]

In *Morning light* Sulivan attacks any effort, whether by advertisers, politicians, or church leaders, to move people by group pressure rather than an appeal to individual conscience, and condemns intellectual and psychological coercion even on behalf of a supposedly holy cause. He constantly warns against the temptation to operate in terms of numbers and power, whether by sponsoring TV evangelism or launching a church campaign to influence public laws on abortion.

Sulivan speaks primarily to those he called 'les petits chrétiens de l'incertitude',[18] plagued by doubt but pursued by faith, less interested in the outward forms of religion than in responding to an interior call. He invites such readers to forsake their illusions and become pilgrims on the road to the absolute:

> If you're lost in the labyrinth of conflicting truths, overwhelmed by the law, restrained by fear – stop this game, free yourself from faith itself. Live in the joyous life of today. Nothing is worse than boredom and sadness. Faith will not abandon you so easily. It's as persistent as crabgrass.[19]

NOTES

1 Claude Lębrun, *Invitation à Jean Sulivan* (Paris: Cerf, 1981).
2 Jean Sulivan, *The sea remains* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), o.p.
3 Jean Sulivan, *Morning light* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988; UK distributor, Gracewing).
4 Jean Sulivan, *The sea remains*, p 90.
5 Jean Sulivan, *Eternity, my beloved* (St Paul, MN: River Boat Books, 1999; UK distributor Goodliffe Neale).
6 *Ibid.*, p 50.
7 *Ibid.*, p 1.
8 *Ibid.*, p 97.
9 *Ibid.*, p 31.
10 Padraig Gormally, 'A stray in the profession: rebellion in the work of Jean Sulivan', *Cross Currents* (Winter 1985–6), p 430.
11 *Cross Currents* (Winter 1985–6), pp 443–451.

12 *The American Catholic*, July 1988.
13 *Je veux battre mon tambour*, pp 43–87.
14 Roger Bichelberger, 'Jean Sulivan, a Christian witness for our times', *Renasence* (Spring 1982), p 58.
15 Eamon Maher, 'The figure of the priest in the writings of Jean Sulivan', *Modern Believing* (April 1988), pp 28–29.
16 *Morning light*, p 124.
17 *L'Exode* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1980), pp 195–196.
18 *Matinales II, La traversée des illusions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), p 253.
19 *Morning light*, p 128.