



2001-2

A Case for Reading Jean Sullivan in Translation

Eamon Maher

Institute of Technology, Tallaght, eamon.maher@ittdublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <http://arrow.dit.ie/ittbus>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Maher, E., (2001) A Case for Reading Jean Sullivan in Translation, *The Month*, February, pp.76-9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Business and Humanities at ARROW@DIT. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@DIT. For more information, please contact yvonne.desmond@dit.ie, arrow.admin@dit.ie, brian.widdis@dit.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License](#)



A champion of the marginalised



Eamon Maher presents a strong case for reading the novels of the French priest-writer, Jean Sullivan, in translation.

EAMON MAHER

The French priest-writer, Jean Sullivan (1913-1980), is a significant figure in French Christian letters in the post-World War II period. He was not of Irish descent, as his name might suggest, but rather took the *nom de plume* Sullivan after watching Preston Sturges' Hollywood comedy, *Sullivan's Travels*.¹ He was careful to include only one 'l' in his version of the name, as *aile* (pronounced 'l' in French) means *wing*. Giving himself two wings, like an angel, didn't conform to Sullivan's opinion of himself! There are currently three titles of Sullivan available in English translation, *The Sea Remains* (*Mais il y a la mer*, Gallimard 1964), a novel, *Morning Light* (*Matinales*, Gallimard, 1976), his spiritual itinerary, and most recently *Eternity My Beloved?* (*Car je t'aime ô éternité*, Gallimard, 1966), one of his later novels. My own translation of the memoir of the death of his mother, *Anticipate Every Goodbye* (*Devance tout adieu*, Gallimard, 1966), was published by Veritas in Autumn 2000.

I view very positively the availability of Sullivan in translation, as he has a challenging way of viewing Christianity and people's beliefs. He will not let his readers sit comfortably on their laurels. He forces us to reassess our faith in the light of the Gospel message of unconditional love. His writings are not merely directed at believers, however. In fact, it is quite likely that his words will fall on more fertile ground with people who are struggling with belief than those who live in the spiritual comfort zone.

Sullivan published his first novel in 1958, when he was forty-five years of age. Before that, he endured the death of his father in the trenches in the early stages of World War I (1916), an event which left his mother and himself vulnerable when the local landlord



Jean Sullivan

felt obliged to increase the rent to provide for his son's rather extravagant lifestyle. Sullivan's mother was thus forced to re-marry, an event that left her young son inconsolable. Like Baudelaire before him, Sullivan had difficulty accepting the fact that a stranger had come into his life to occupy his father's place. He had nothing as such against his stepfather, who appears to have been an honourable man in every respect, but he did have difficulty forgiving his mother for what he considered her 'betrayal'. From that moment on, Sullivan looked on

himself as 'the son of a dead man', a sort of misfit, outsider, marginal person.

His love for his mother was undiminished and he constantly recalls in his writings the debt he owed her for passing on the faith to him. She it was who read the Gospel aloud to him every evening and he became conscious of its 'breath' and 'rhythm'. She must have been very proud to see her young son choose the priesthood as a career. He was ordained in Rennes in 1938. Contrary to his mother's hopes and expectations, however, Sullivan was not going to be your conventional priest. His rebellious nature and refusal to conform led him on more than one occasion to take the marginal path. His decision to become a writer was also quite daring as he did not see himself as the defender of the Catholic religion. In fact, he was scathing at times about abuses within the Church and he was particularly opposed to triumphalism and hypocrisy.

A time of questioning and revolt

Sullivan is thus very much a writer of his time, a time of questioning and revolt against traditional values. It is significant that many of his agnostic and atheistic characters are more attractive and possess more genuinely Christian qualities than those who claim membership of the Church. In this brief review article I deal with the latest title of Sullivan to appear in English translation, *Eternity My Beloved* and I hope to show the elements within it that might attract the readers of *The Month*. Before embarking on that discussion, however, I feel it might be useful for the reader to have some insights into the literary scene in France at the time Sullivan began writing.

The 1950s and the 60s were a time when France was recovering from the trauma of the two World Wars, especially the second one which had shown up a side of the French character that was none too savoury. The absurdity of the human condition, as exemplified by the plays and novels of Beckett and Ionesco among others, appeared obvious to many people. Camus wondered how, if there was a God, he could allow the suffering of little children. The New Novel, with its fragmented style and lack of traditional characters and plot, was gaining popularity. Catholic literature, which had enjoyed such success in France at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, began to falter because its masters — Claudel, Péguy, Bloy, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Mauriac, Bernanos — had not been equalled by their successors.

In his *Petite littérature individuelle* (1971), Sullivan made the remark that the spiritual and intellectual atmosphere of the second half of the twentieth century demanded a new approach on the part of a novelist of

Christian inspiration such as himself. He realised how futile the efforts of the minor writers of the fifties and sixties were, because they were trying to emulate the great Catholic novelists who had preceded them:

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 return to silence.³

As a novelist, Sullivan sought to present spirituality in a different way from his predecessors. When he won the *Grand prix de littérature* for *Mais il y a la mer* in 1964 he was hailed in many circles as an author capable of taking over from Bernanos. Sullivan did not wish to 'take over' from anyone. In *Petite littérature individuelle*, he wrote: 'It is in invention that the future of Christian writers lies if they want to be something other than specialists, scribes or efficient instruments on the market of religion.'⁴ He therefore decided to change his approach after the commercial and critical success enjoyed by *Mais il y a la mer*. That is why it is so useful to have the next novel that he published, *Eternity My Beloved*, available in English translation. It allows us to demonstrate in what way Sullivan's approach to literature and spirituality evolves with the passing years.

The fact that it won a literary prize proves that *Mais il y a la mer* corresponded to a certain traditional conception of what constitutes the novel. Sullivan felt uneasy at the gala evening at which his success was announced. Already he felt like an impostor, a member of a cosy literary circle. His main reason for accepting the award was the thought of his mother's joy at having her son acknowledged in the pages of *La Croix*, which would allay her fears with regard to his writings. In *Eternity My Beloved*, however, there is a definite attempt to distance himself from any traditional ideas about plot and the presentation of characters. The narrator doesn't attempt to hide his presence in the text and there is tantalising confusion between the narrator, the author and the characters. The narrator is at one and the same time participating in the experience and describing it. From the outset we are told that the author's original idea had been to write the story of Elizabeth, a prostitute from Pigalle. However, through this woman he met with Strozzi, an elderly priest living in the area and ministering to a group of marginalised women:

Strozzi stole my novel from me. To be honest, he's paying me back a hundredfold since he's giving me his very soul.

'The kind I like'

Strozzi is no mere fictional creation. His real name was Auguste Rossi and he was known to Sullivan and others as the *Père Pigalle*. Sullivan is aware that the witness provided by his character is different from his own. As the narrator says: 'He lives what I just talk about'. His admiration for Strozzi is obvious from the outset as he conforms to a group of people with whom Sullivan identifies:

Frankly, that's the kind I like. The ones who have no family or folklore. All human love 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. (...) they have such a loneliness in their hearts that they go about like beggars, looking all over the world for father, mother, brothers, sisters. They finally become rebels and, naturally enough, are persecuted.

This type of conversational style, which engages both the reader and the narrator in a kind of dialogue, is constant throughout the novel. That said, Sullivan does not fall into the trap of preaching. He wants to share with his readers his conviction that it is necessary to live in the desert in order to come closer to God. This desert can take many forms. It can be the stripping away of social and professional respectability or the sacrifice of self for those in need. In either case, the scenario sketched is not a rosy one. Sullivan himself endured much pain in his life and found it necessary to uproot himself from the comfortable existence he had in Rennes, where he was well-known for running a cinéclub and a cultural centre, in order to live in the anonymity of Paris. Literature was his way of helping people to persevere. By describing the witness of people like Strozzi, Sullivan felt that he was performing a worthwhile function. Strozzi makes the ultimate choice in favour of the downtrodden. Deprived of all financial support from his order because of misgivings regarding the bizarre nature of his apostolate, he is left in a precarious position. But that doesn't deter him: 'He told me that prayer only became natural to him, a true link of friendship, the day he became part of his neighbourhood in Paris'.

Unconditional love

There is a long Christian tradition that points to suffering as a path to joy. Strozzi's itinerary conforms to that model. He does not attempt to convert the prostitutes; he simply places himself at their disposal. Paquerette sums up the views of many of the girls when she says that Strozzi...



Abbé Pierre

seemed to emerge from an experience that was different from ordinary life. It's as if he were making love to you without realising it and without your realising it either. You'd like to pour out on others the love that he has given you.

This unconditional love leaves an indelible mark on souls long since sunk into spiritual and moral disillusionment. Prostitutes don't often encounter men who have no desire other than to help them.

Readers should not expect a strong story-line in this novel — an obvious temptation in an account of this nature: 'I could have made up scenes, livened everything 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 that craziness.' Indeed the ingredients were all present for a blockbuster publication, but Sullivan resisted the enticement and chose instead to relate in an informal and deadpan manner the story of a priest in Pigalle. Clearly he had changed his approach from his previous novel. What the reader gets out of *Eternity My Beloved* is dependent on his/her preparedness to go with the flow of the words and to enter into the mindset of both the writer and his main protagonist.

The main thing to remember with Sullivan is that he consciously set out to reproduce a type of modern-day parable in which what counted was not so much the polished style or the logical characters, but rather the

underlying paradox of what was written on the page. In an interview with a priest-friend of his, Bernard Feillet, Sullivan said that at the beginning of his literary career he had wanted to produce finely-sculpted, sophisticated prose. After *Mais il y a la mer* he found that the aesthetic side of his art gave way to his desire to reach a small number of readers with whom he could converse through his books and perhaps help them to live. He said that the first three books he wrote after 1964 (including *Eternity My Beloved*) created a type of 'connivance' between himself and his readers, who were in the main down-to-earth, ordinary people:

I am not talking about those people who love literature, 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 readers I want are those who say: 'this book, this page changed something in my life'. I have my few clients in every part of the country.⁵

In order to enjoy Sullivan you have to come to terms with an untraditional approach to the novel form and to realise that his desire is to provoke his readers to reconsider their approach to spirituality. I should point out that his prose is at times exquisite, capable of matching the best writers. So his decision to abandon the polished prose of his early writing was not in any way due to a lack of literary capacity. No, his motivation was spiritual. He felt that in order to reach

those who were in pain, those who wouldn't normally be attracted to literature, he needed to speak in a more personal and accessible way. In my view, he possesses literary skills plus a spiritual vision. His primary concern is for his readers to embark on a quest whose holy grail will be found only after death. He entices us to follow his characters into a labyrinth full of symbols, mysteries and interrogations. When we come out of this maze, what do we find? More unanswered questions which reset us in motion towards the ultimate truth, which is divine and thus beyond human comprehension. The quest has then to be begun all over again. So you will not have your questions definitively answered by Sullivan, because there are no definitive answers when it comes to God and eternity. I strongly urge you to read him in translation if you cannot do so in the French original. You will not be disappointed.

Notes

1. For more information on the origins of his pseudonym and some of his writings, I recommend you read my article, published in the June 1995 edition of *The Month*: 'Jean Sullivan, Champion of the Marginalised' (pp.249-252).
2. This is Sr Ellen Riordan's excellent translation which was published last year in the US by River Boat Books. It retails at £11.95 in the UK and is distributed by Goodliffe Neale.
3. *Petite littérature individuelle*, Gallimard, 1971, p.142.
4. *Ibid.*, p.131.
5. *Bernard Feillet interroge Jean Sullivan*, Paris: Le Centurion, 1978, pp.14-15.

Eamon Maher lectures in French at the Regional Technical College, Tallaght, Dublin.

CHANGING ROOMS

**Prayer makes a room: constructs
dimensions under-, around-, over-;
delineates with some substance
my boundaries, my movements,
my taste in spiritual furniture.**

**Then, in a new setting, I lose
my prayer: the carpet's pulled,
walls and ceilings dislocate, pictures jar,
like a house recorded by Rachel Whitebread
filled with concrete, I have no room**

**to reach for You. Is this a design
of Yours? Has my holy place become so
self-adapted, prayer cushions moulded
to suit my frame, You must deconstruct
privacy for unknown mansions in Your house?**

OLIVE POWELL