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A Glimpse at Death and the Transcendent
in Gerard Manley Hopkins and Jean Sulivan

Eamon Maher

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It is hazardous to draw parallels between the French priest-writer, Jean Sulivan (1913-1980), and Gerard Manley Hopkins, as the two writers were separated by culture, language and tradition. However, they did have a similar approach to literature, which is well illustrated by their attempts to portray the transcendent. This task has long fascinated writers and artists of all types. Because, where there is beauty, there is also a glimpse of God's presence among us.

Hopkins is famous for his lyrical evocations of scenes from nature that are to him like transfigurations of the divine. Thus we have sonnets like 'The Starlight Night' and 'Spring', where nature is celebrated and praised:

'Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies' he urges us in 'The Starlight Night'. Always the commentary comes back to God, as the most ordinary scenes assume extraordinary resonance:

These are indeed the barn; withindoors house
The shocks. This piece-bright paling shuts the spouse...
Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows.

In the sonnet 'Spring', even the weeds have a richness and a beauty that are out of keeping with their normal appearance: they are transformed, transcended in such a way as to provide a pre-figuration of the Divine:

What is all this juice and all this joy?
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning
In Eden garden. - Have, get, before it cloy,
Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,
Most, 0 maid's child, thy choice and worthy the winning.

This article will concentrate on Jean Sulivan's award-winning memoir, Anticipate Every Goodbye, a memoir that deals with the theme of death and the transcendent and draw certain links between how the two writers approached this universal theme in their works. We will see that there are definite similarities in how Hopkins and Sulivan reacted to the pain and suffering so often associated with death. Sulivan's memoir supplies a moving account of the relationship between the priest and his mother, a simple Breton of strong faith, who lost her first husband during the Great War and had to remarry in order to meet the repayments on her rented farm. This event left a deep scar on her young son, who found it
extremely difficult to accept the arrival of a stranger into their lives.

In an interview with Bernard Feuillet, he described the importance of the episode: ‘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 is 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.’

Later, Sulivan will realise that his mother had no choice but to remarry. Children, however, don’t think in practical terms. 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 is a cruel psychological blow from which it will take him a long time to recover. As well as dealing with his childhood in Brittany, a childhood which was characterised by a close affinity with the land and all its secret marvels—some of his descriptions echo Hopkins’ lyrical evocations of nature—the book also treats in a poignant and dramatic way of the pain and the joy associated with death.

After his ordination in 1938, Sulivan was sent to Rennes where he taught in a Catholic lycée and was Chaplain at the university. Every Sunday he would go to visit his mother. For the majority of this period, the two were alone again. Sulivan wondered what life would be like when she eventually died. This thought crossed 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 alright this time round. I can make out mother’s shadow moving about through the curtains.’

He looks on his mother as his refuge, his strength. She is the one to whom he turns when there is turmoil in his life. She is always there for him, her comforting presence a constant reminder that he is not alone. He is also inspired by her strong faith, a faith so different from his own. For example, she never calls into question the authority of the priest and accepts without demur what is said in sermons. She often tells her son that he shouldn’t complicate things so much, that it is easier to follow what the Church says. However, he is of a different mindset and vision. He doesn’t conform in any way to her image of the traditional priest. He rarely dons the clerical garb and, when released from pastoral duties by his bishop in order to pursue his writing on a full-time basis, her suspicions are heightened. Is he about to leave the priesthood altogether, she wonders? Is he having doubts about his vocation? She

1. L’instant l’éternité,
Bernard Feuillet interroge
Jean Sulivan (Paris: Le
Centurion, ‘Les
19-20. The translation is
my own.
Spirituality... needn't have worried. Caught up in literary and cultural activities, Sullivan came to see at a certain point in his life that he was wearing a mask. It was possible for him to present religion in an erudite manner, give impressive sermons using his knowledge of literature and culture to good effect. People often complimented him afterwards on his ‘performance.’ However, he discovered that it is only when pain visits a person that he truly sees what the Christian path is all about: ‘When life breaks you it is not the comfortable image of God we have constructed for ourselves that we seek, but the poor Son of man who cries out for help within us. It had taken all this life of feigned fervour, […] it had required that he forget what he thought he knew, the certitudes that he used as arms against the truth, his convictions that were like shields, in order for him to begin to pray with a more authentic heart, the same prayer but said in a new and different way.’

2. Anticipate Every Goodbye, trans. Eamon Maher (Dublin: Veritas, 2000), p.64. All futures references will be to this edition.

When news reaches him in Paris that his mother has been taken ill, his worst nightmare becomes a reality. He rushes to her bedside and is appalled at the red rash on her face, her fragility. He is told initially that she has food-poisoning, then that it is a problem with the urea, that she will be fine; finally they tell him that she’s dying. Hope turns to despair as they go from the hospital in Rennes to Nantes, where all sense of dignity is lost as the elderly woman, shivering with cold, is forced to remove the hospital gown so that it can be taken back to Rennes. Throughout these painful days, the priest-son, looks on helplessly: ‘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.’

3. Anticipate’, p.110

This is not at all what her son had expected. Her faith, always rock solid, deserts her momentarily in her hour of need. No words of comfort reach her ears. It is through writing the memoir that Sullivan sees the significance of this momentary weakness: ‘Only at that precise moment did I know 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.’ The naked honesty which characterises this account is what gives it a special appeal. It takes much courage to share with readers moments as private and as painful as those experienced by Sullivan as he witnesses his mother making her way painfully from this world to the uncertainty of eternity. Finally, the medical experts in Nantes tell him that there is no further hope and it is agreed that his mother will be transported home to die. Just as she is placed in the ambulance...
and they are putting the drip in place, she passes away. Hospital regulations would require them to bring the body back inside the building, but the driver agrees to continue on their way provided that her eyes are left open. This provides some respite for Sullivan as he watches the images of the sky and the trees reflected in the eyes of his mother—she looks as if she is at peace. This respite is short-lived, however, as the significance of what has happened begins to seep in. He understands that there will be no more Sunday visits, no shelter to which he can turn when in need. It is unusual that he doesn’t take any formal part in the funeral ceremony—he does not appear on the altar at the concelebrated Mass. Instead, he is dressed informally, wearing black sunglasses to hide the tears that come when they close the coffin—he was more attached to the body that he thought. Sullivan doesn’t want to make a spectacle of his suffering. All the people who approach him to offer their condolences are like indistinct shadows—it is what is happening on the inside that is important. The platitudes that are offered: ‘We’re so sorry for your troubles; ‘You will meet her again in Heaven’, are meaningless. As he says: ‘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.’

So where does transcendence come in? The ultimate test for anyone’s faith is in facing up to the reality of death. It is easy to latch on to religious concepts as you latch on to other formulae but it is not until you look eternity in the eye that you will ever know what constitutes the essence of Christianity. Literature, for Sullivan, is a comfort as well as an agony. As he writes: ‘Writing down these anecdotes, expressing ordinary feelings, which quite possibly millions of people secretly feel after seeing their own mother dying, reassures and comforts me a bit. It sometimes seems to me that my mother is the humble mother of a great number of people.’

The great writers are the one whose humanity shines through and informs everything that they write. Suffering, frailty, sensitivity are important elements in the aesthetic and Christian paths. During a retreat in 1883, Hopkins wrote: ‘I have much and earnestly prayed that God will lift me above myself to a higher state of grace, in which I may have more union with him... In meditating on the Crucifixion I saw how my asking to be raised to a higher degree of
Both Hopkins and Sullivan were indeed lifted on a higher cross. Both Hopkins and Sullivan were indeed lifted on a higher cross, as can be revealed in the ‘Terrible Sonnets’ and Anticipate Every Goodbye. They managed to transcend their suffering, to ‘commune with’ it, and that is where the force and inspiration of their writings emerge. But there are differences in their approach. In the ‘Terrible Sonnets’, Hopkins definitely borders on despair and yet he nearly always finds a source of consolation or acceptance at the end of the poems. The sonnet 47 beginning with the line ‘My own heart let me have more pity on’, enumerates many trials and tribulations of the soul and yet manages to conclude with the defiant lines:

Soul, self; come, poor Jackself, I do advise
You, jaded, let be; call off thoughts awhile
Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room; let joy size
At God knows when to God knows what;
whose smile’s not wrung, see you; unforeseen times rather
- as skies
Between pie mountains - lights a lovely smile.

Sullivan is much less likely to offer any end to the suffering that has to be endured. He is ruthless on himself and on his readers because, as he says: ‘When the Son of Man, who is also the Son of God, cries out that he has been abandoned on the Cross, by what right do you seek reassuring truths?’ Sullivan sees that faith is often found in the lack of faith, that it is not only light, but darkness. He also comes to see that the hereafter is lived out in the present, that we need to anticipate every goodbye, because every goodbye is the last goodbye. To conclude, I will leave you with a quotation that sums up Sullivan’s approach to literature. It comes from his essay, Petite littérature individuelle: ‘Writing, in a way I cannot fully grasp, is a wound of humanity, and the word is a flower that grows inside it, imperceptibly.’

8. Anticipate, p.125

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