

Eternity, My Beloved, by Jean Sullivan

reviewed by [Tim Unsworth](#) in the [July 19, 2000](#) issue

The Prodigal Son may have left home because home was permeated with a fainthearted love—a prudent and stunted love—that made him want to get away. So suggests Jerome Strozzi, the main character of this novel by the late Jean Sullivan. "After we pass through the valley where souls are formed, there will no longer be families, but only persons—that is to say, friends. And woe to you if your wives or your husbands were not friends," Strozzi adds.

This is pure Sullivan. He turns not only scripture but life inside out. It's as if his priest-character, Strozzi, who moves into Paris's notorious Pigalle district to save prostitutes, ends up trying to save prelates. Strozzi has only a little to say to the denizens of Pigalle. His gentle but pointed rebukes are aimed at "the world of sensible, decent people, of respectable families, to the entrepreneurs of salvation, to those who trade in souls, to all those who prefer money, order and comfort to love. Without knowing or acknowledging it, without even recognizing it in themselves, they prefer principles to spiritual liberty."

Sullivan is a verbal pointillist. His small dots and brush strokes, reminiscent of Georges Seurat's paintings, form a coherent picture when one stands back from the narrative. His novel is filled with meditative snapshots—frequent reflective pauses in the story's plot. "A jumble of consciousness, that's all that it was, all kind of ideas," the narrator says at the close of the book. "I'd have other ideas tomorrow, which would take off in another direction. People shouldn't believe in ideas too much. Everything can evaporate in smoke, in words." Sullivan's disjointed narrative reflects the conflict in the minds of those obsessed with parsing moral behavior. Those obsessed with sin often end up embracing it.

Sullivan, whose real name was Joseph Lemarchand, was born in Montauban, France, in 1913. (He took the pseudonym "Sullivan" from Preston Sturges's film comedy *Sullivan's Travels*, dropping one "l" in the process.) His father was killed in World War I and his mother remarried when Sullivan was six. In 1938 he was ordained in the diocese of Renne and served there for 26 years before securing his bishop's permission to move to Paris and live among the poor of Pigalle. He published his first

book in '58. Twenty-nine more-most of them fiction-followed before Sullivan was killed in an automobile accident in the Bois de Boulogne in 1980.

Only three of those books appear in English translation. (The other two are the spiritual journal *Morning Light* and the novel *The Sea Remains*.) Sullivan was France's greatest Catholic writer since Georges Bernanos (1888-1948) and François Mauriac (1885-1970). However, he represents the antitheses of Bernanos's rigidity and adherence to church teaching, although both championed a rejection of materialism. Nobel Prize-winner Mauriac, like Sullivan, wrote about people who existed in a tortured universe and who believed in a nonconformist Catholicism.

Eternity, My Beloved appeared in 1966 (Riordan's excellent translation was published in 1999). Sullivan's original intent was to write about Elizabeth, a melancholic prostitute who, apart from her profession, leads a traditional life. She introduces the narrator to Jerome Strozzi, an aging priest who ministers to society's throwaways. Strozzi is modeled on Auguste Rossi, a worker priest, who came to Pigalle during World War II. (The worker-priest movement flourished in France for a few decades but faded not long after Vatican II, a council it had partly inspired.)

Sullivan presents Strozzi as a brilliant careerist—a scholar and seminary rector who abandons the episcopal track to find an authentic use for his priesthood among the spiritually disillusioned and socially scorned.

The narrator comments, "I wish I could show [Strozzi] reacting against . . . those disciples who were on fire to serve Christ but were even more interested in having their privileges restored. I'd like to show Strozzi protesting against those interminable ceremonies, bombastic prayers, and the thousand out-of-date customs, against a deductive and triumphalist apologetics combined with a mechanistic rational theology. . . . But no, the time isn't ripe. Intelligence will continue to sleep for a long time."

But Strozzi is not angry. He praises the prelates who repeatedly call him in to question his apostolate of presence. They are nonplussed by his lack of interest in the Church of the capital "C," which matches their lack of concern for the church of the small "c."

Padraig O'Gormaille, a professor of French at the National University of Ireland who has written extensively on Sullivan's work, maintains that Sullivan asks us to inhabit the spiritual space beyond fear and laws, beyond power struggles and ideology. So

Strozzi believes that the idolization of virtue can be translated by multiple laws into an obsession with the opposite. Even the catechism, by proposing rational answers to impossible questions, can actually contribute to a climate of unbelief. Sullivan is a prophetic witness to a Christianity that is yet to be lived.