



A relationship with Dom Sylvester,

Part 1 (1965–77)

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I met Dom Sylvester at a poetry symposium in Nottingham in late 1965, through the poet Bob Cobbing, whose Writers Forum workshops I had attended in London. At that stage I had graduated with a diploma in Fine Arts (London, 1963) (degree courses for artists hadn't been invented then) and had started a school-teaching job near Croydon. Circumstances led to my becoming involved in the organization of an international exhibition of concrete and experimental poetry at Arlington Mill, in Bibury, in Summer 1966. The idea was Dom Sylvester's: it arose in conversation with my father, David Verey, when the latter was visiting Prinknash in connection with his work on Pevsner's *Buildings of England Gloucestershire* (2 vols., Penguin 1970). Dom Sylvester put the idea to Ken Cox, who was teaching at Gloucestershire College of Art and John Furnival who taught in the prints department at Corsham. We all met at lunch at Barnsley House in April 1966. Ken took on the job of organizing and I volunteered to help with publicity: Sylvester sent me a list of nearly three hundred and fifty names and addresses of people to be invited to the private view. In the event, the exhibition opened on 23rd July, 1966: around 60 exhibitors from 16 different countries had sent work. The Small Press Association was founded at the time of the Arlington exhibition and held its first meeting there.

[Sylvester and Silvester are alternative spellings the Dom's name: and, as a poet he signed himself dsh (or DSH). Each is useful. Sylvester seems to have become the standard form today. When I first met him, he signed himself 'Silvester'. Throughout my correspondence with him (1966–74) I always started letters, 'Dear Silvester'. Ken Cox rather liked to spell Sylvester with a 'y' and as a result he is included in the Arlington exhibition catalogue as Dom Sylvester Houédard. Whichever form of spelling is used the pronunciation places the emphasis on the first syllable – Silvester. As for Houédard, in a letter to the novice master, Dom Raphael (incidentally pronounced 'raffle'), he said that to avoid confusion it should sound something like WED ARE.]

I had been drawn as much by the radical aspects of 1960s arts and culture as by poetry. The key participants and events of the time have been well summarized by Andrew Wilson in a Tate Gallery publication, *Art and the 60s, This was Tomorrow* (2004). Wilson's contribution (pp. 92–111) is titled 'A Poetics of Dissent: Notes on a Developing Counterculture in London in the Early Sixties'. Dom Sylvester Houédard figures significantly in it. By the time that I met Bob Cobbing in the late summer of 1965 and, subsequently, Dom Sylvester, the seeds of an active

counterculture had already germinated. It embraced a wide spectrum of people broadly embracing culture and the arts. There were darker elements but there was also a real potential for a new constructive freedom for the individual in a new order. The latter he referred to in his much-quoted 1963 essay on concrete poetry with the epithet 'coexistential'. From 1965 through the later years of the decade the shock of the counterculture continued to reverberate, implicating and giving direction to increasing numbers of the younger generation. The 'underground news' of *International Times* and *OZ* were at the centre of an attempt to make it implicit in every aspect of life. This is not the place to discuss the details of these events, but only to note that Dom Sylvester, deeply enmeshed in the centre ground of the putative revolution, might have had the opportunity to put his mind to becoming its prophet. In the event it was made impossible because of the limitations imposed on him by monastic life.

It is clear in this respect, however (though it wasn't at the time), that Dom Sylvester's mind and the conscience with which he positioned himself so radically in relation to the cultural 1960s is the same by which he positioned himself in relation to monastic life: that is, to its foundation in Benedictine regulation and to the Catholic Church as he knew it, both present and past. He wanted as much, or perhaps more in the way of a change of heart in his community as he did for the whole of humanity. One might also suggest with some justification that his vocation as a monk had roots in an intuitive insight into the changes in the modes of expression of spirituality in the later 20th century. And that it was with this certainty that he participated in the processes of change. This, however, is something that I began to understand many years later.

Institutions, however much they appear to be isolated, are affected by cultural change. Nevertheless it was a feature of knowing Dom Sylvester that you only saw the obvious, outward-looking features of the monastery and its life. There was no invitation to come inside either his home or his workplace: there was only the person and his reputation. What I knew of the latter came in the first instance from Bob Cobbing and the booklet of Sylvester's work that Bob had published, *Kinkon*, from stories related by Ken Cox and John Furnival and others of their experiences of him. His correspondence with me was built on what I had shown him of myself, steps in a slowly evolving relationship: and he always seemed sensitive to this. His letters were ridged with lightly probing social remarks about who I knew and the names of people who might prove interesting. On visits to Prinknash the only experience of the monastery was of the corridor and the wall behind the beady eyes of an old monk whose room was close by. He would lead you into a guest chamber with a table and two chairs and a small window and shuffle off along the edge of a branching corridor. And later, Sylvester came the same way, his spectacles sometimes held together with Sellotape, carrying an armful of thick buff folders.

For my part, teaching art at a smaller public school for boys, in Dorset (1968–70) I had been eager to try to counter-balance the usual approach to art classes - paper and poster-paints, O-levels and A-levels, with at least the seeds of awareness of the disquiet in art and literature, of the effects that result from suspending judgement and of the freedom implicit in aesthetic choice. These were things for which I was trying to find a means of expression. It is clear to me, however little I may have understood at the time, that Dom Sylvester was a considerable influence and also extremely supportive.

The Scottish poet Thomas A. Clark had come south from Greenock for the first exhibition at Arlington Mill, in 1966, at Sylvester's invitation. We kept in touch and in 1968 when I moved to Dorset and rented a small terrace house a few hundred yards from the school's art department, I invited Tom Clark to use the room on the top floor: with this as his base, he lived a peripatetic life. With Tom's help, and the proceeds from my teaching we started a diverse series of poetry publications under the name 'South Street Publications'. The quality of small-press work at the time was very varied both in presentation and in the quality of its content. South Street used mainly good quality letterpress using set type and metal blocks. Sylvester figured in a collection of wall posters. We wanted to do a series of publications of work by dsh but only three had been done when time and money ran out: a small folded booklet called *Mini-posters* and a slim, good-looking volume, *12 dancepoems from the cosmic typewriter*. Perhaps best known is a poster in memory of Ken Cox who died after a car accident in December 1968. It is a coloured, constellation-like permutation of the alphabet that excludes the letters of his name, Kenelm Cox. (See Nicola Simpson: *Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter*, Occasional Papers, 2012, pp. 90–1.)

The public school that employed me was no exception to the pressure that was felt at the time by institutions, but it was prepared to follow a more ruthless course of action: it isn't surprising that I was asked to leave, but it did surprise me to learn later that the number of boys removed from the school in the following year was probably well in excess of thirty. The problem faced by the school ran deeper than my department. I wasn't a good teacher but there were some on the staff who were intelligent and compassionate: they were wary of getting too close to me and must have found me naïve. Perhaps in the case of the public school the freedom of expression fought for during these years led to more enlightened teaching and to an emphasis on education rather than turning out a stereotype product. In my case, however, my time was up. A letter from Sylvester asked, 'was sacking sick-making?', and went on as if nothing had changed: I had still to tell him that there would be no money to publish three editions that we had wanted to produce, 'streets go both crazy ways at once', 'battledores' and 'a book of onomastikons'. While I was teaching I always had a small car and I had been useful to Sylvester.

School holidays gave opportunities to take him to see George Melhuish in Bristol. I remember one occasion when Francis Rose was staying with George: Sylvester and George wanted the space to talk together so I took Sir Francis on an outing to visit the art galleries of Bristol and Bath. In April 1970, knowing that I had to find a new life and that I was staying on in Gloucestershire, he turned up one day with the American poet Jonathan Williams: a few weeks later he asked a mutual friend, Sandra Raphael, to arrange with me that we would go together to collect him from Prinknash and go on to a party that Patric Morissey (not the well-known singer) was giving, unauthorized by the authorities, on the roof of an Oxford college.

In London from early summer in 1970 until June 1971 I was lucky to get work as a secretary for the Poetry Society in Earls Court Square (though it was a surprisingly old-fashioned organization at the time). In some ways the year I spent in London (1970–71) after my relationship with school-teaching had broken down was one that stands out as a time of happiness and freedom. I continued to participate in the concrete/experimental poetry movement. In September 1970 I went to a symposium in Belgium and sat with a panel of small publishers from Belgium, France, Holland and England. New friends made at that time might have led to long-standing relationships working as a poet/artist in that genre. I wrote a long letter to Sylvester just before going to Belgium. For a time, correspondence with him tailed off to a few postcards. As a sequel to the events of 1970, at a later date he went back to the school at which I had taught, invited by a literary society. He helped one of the boys to a job at the Lisson Gallery, in London, and stayed in contact with others who went on to Cambridge.

In March 1971, a friend from the concrete poetry world, Tom Edmonds, was unwell: I was asked by Tom and his girlfriend to look after their flat in Blenheim Crescent while they went for a holiday in North Africa to try to restore Tom's health. When they returned, Tom was seriously ill and was taken to hospital. He died on 18 May of an undiagnosed auto-immune disease. He was the second of two great losses. Ken Cox whom I have mentioned above died at the end of 1968 after a car accident. Sylvester felt the loss of both of them, particularly of Ken: on both occasions it fell to me to break the news to him. Though both worked in three dimensions, I regarded both of them as true lyric poets.

Sometime after Tom Edmonds's death I went to Switzerland to hear J. Krishnamurti. In Saanen, talking to someone in the tent in which the crowds gathered to listen to him, I heard about U.G. Krishnamurti and was told that he had a chalet in the town and that he had things to say that J. Krishnamurti wasn't free to talk about. The two days I spent at U.G. Krishnamurti's flat along with some of his disciples did nothing to give me confidence. I desperately tried to find a meaningful question to ask. I had no idea what I was looking for. Yet perhaps it did awaken the seed of new awareness of emptiness and need. On the third morning I didn't know if

I was going to go back to U.G's flat and the uncertainty met an old conviction in me that if I kept searching I would find what I was looking for in Gloucestershire. I took a train home the same day.

It was mid-August 1971. Earlier in the year I had inherited some money from my great-uncle and had decided to look for a place to buy in the Welsh borders. Before the end of the month a Presteigne estate agent sent me a list of properties on the Green-Price estate in need of restoration. On 30 August I went to Radnorshire with an appointment to view: Tom Clark came with me. The Warren farmhouse was the second that we visited. Five hundred feet above the town of Knighton on a steep slope a single elevation stood facing a junction on a little used side-road. The modern farm buildings further up the lane were hidden from view by an overgrown hedge and trees. The house looked down over a small, rectangular yard strewn with grey rocks and old purple slates, surrounded by a number of buildings. A memory that remained with me from my visit was of standing in the open barn at the back of the yard while a gentle summer rain fell out of a light sky. My decision made itself and my offer was accepted.

I had been asked to stay in Gloucestershire for the first three weeks of September to look after Arlington Mill Museum, in Bibury. One afternoon I was sitting at the entry desk when a dog came in and sat at my feet: it was followed soon afterwards by a young man in a brimmed felt hat with a country kerchief around his neck who had drifted down the hill on his bicycle. He was Lou, a wheelwright, and his dog's name was Rye. They were heading for Swyre Farm, near Aldsworth. In short, I was told that since Rye had found me I was to come to meditation at Swyre Farm at 6 o'clock. I knew the place: it had belonged to the family of the wife of a farmer I had sometimes worked for in school holidays a decade earlier. In the following weeks I went there a number of times.

In November 1971 I bought a caravan from a man in Abingdon and took possession of The Warren farmhouse. It was totally uninhabitable, its door choked with brambles. Soon after I arrived the postman brought a letter to my caravan door from Chris Carrell at the Ceolfrith Arts Centre in Sunderland. It asked if I would guest-edit a monograph to accompany a major exhibition of Dom Sylvester's work, to be held at the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in July/August 1972. It would be based on the Victorian and Albert Museum loan exhibition that had opened in their Exhibition Road wing on 9 November. Since then, this 72-page mini-monograph, published as *Ceolfrith 15*, has been the only attempt to present the flavour of his work of the 1960s and '70s. I had detailed instructions from Sylvester and was left in no doubt about how it was to be presented. The dsh exhibition, organized by the V & A prints department, was nonetheless a tribute to his work as an artist. It may on the other hand be seen as a symptom

of the changing decade, of the isolation of the artist from the politically charged beginnings of the cultural flowering of the 1960s that Sylvester had dubbed co-existential.

Between the summer vacation of 1971 and that of 1972, I kept in touch with Richard Waddington, whom I had met at Swyre Farm the previous summer. We saw each other in London on at least one occasion and it is likely that we talked about Dom Sylvester. But I didn't start to visit Swyre Farm again until the first week of September 1972. On 10 September, 1972, I wrote to Sylvester to tell him about the events at Swyre Farm: talks by Warren Kenton and Keith Critchlow, John Richards and George Trevelyan and others; and a triple wedding. In my letter to Sylvester I also mentioned that when I was at Swyre Farm, Richard Waddington had told me that he and David Hornsby had visited Prinknash. In Sylvester's reply he says that the visit from the beshara center (sic) was a great pleasure and he wonders how he can wangle a visit over there some time.

In January 1973 there was a further exchange of letters. The Dom wanted me to collect him from Prinknash and to take him to visit Swyre Farm. I wrote to him, tactfully backing out. Though I understood very little I sensed that there was something behind the wider community at Swyre that offered the potential for a new relationship with myself. But I had not yet arrived. It is strange to recall that I had always felt spiritually isolated. My reluctance to bring Sylvester there may have come from a sense that, in some obscure way, Sylvester had been a spiritual mirror: but we had never spoken in a personal way about spirituality or even about religion. I didn't know why he wanted to visit Swyre Farm or why he was pressing me to take him there. I found that I was strongly resistant to giving him the opportunity of asking me direct questions: nor did I want to be seen arriving with him or to have to answer questions from others at the Beshara Centre about my past relationship with him, a past from which I felt that I was moving on.

At the time I was still working with Tom Clark and Neil Mills on the first (poetics) issue of a new publication. Most of the work was done, but as publisher I would be funding and distributing it. Sylvester had contributed a work called *Proses 1-5*, an essay written at the time of the Victoria & Albert exhibition, but never published. Neil and his wife Elaine had been living for some time at The Warren farm in another caravan. He had helped me to lay a concrete floor in the section of the barn attached to the back gable of the house: Elaine was using the space for her pottery. She made rather beautiful honey-glazed red slip-ware. We had even installed a telephone. Tom, Neil and I had worked together as a group doing poetry performances that we called 'Experiments in Disintegrating Language'. The Arts Council had produced an LP record with our performance on one side and Bob Cobbing on the other. But at this stage it wasn't making any further progress and each of us had reasons to want to move on.

The camera-ready artwork for the poetics issue would find its way, unpublished, into Marvin and Ruth Sackner's collection in Miami.

There is no evidence that I corresponded with Dom Sylvester between January 1973 and January 1974. In the first months of the year I visited and stayed at Swyre Farm on several occasions: later, on the days that J. G. Bennett gave the talks that would be featured in the Beshara Publications volume *Intimations*, I drove regularly to Swyre Farm. Dave Moore, the son of a local Knighton architect, had singlehandedly taken on the work of converting The Warren farmhouse. Before he finished, the attic ceiling was sealed and lined and a temporary white finish was given to the walls, windows and doors. A portrait of Dom Sylvester by John Furnival was first to be hung in the house. The portrait had been used on the publicity material for the V & A exhibition. This was the original work, painted in 1965, black on white on a board a little more than 2ft by 4ft, Dom Sylvester is outlined in profile on the right. His mouth spouts little, black rectangles that fly chaotically across the painting to form a block of irregularly regimented walls on the left, visual bites of sound that form into a new kind of order.

A letter from Dom Sylvester arrived in January 1974. It started: 'Halim came to lunch and said he hopes you will be at Beshara when I give my talk, probably Friday 1st March.' I am not sure that it actually happened on St David's day, but I was there. I have never seen any notes on this talk: but they may exist. It was on the subject of the early Church Fathers so I assume that he intended it to be a survey of the writing and influence of the Greek and Cappadocian Fathers. My memory is that his talk was extremely drawn out, and that when a break was eventually called, Dom Sylvester expressed surprise and told us that we had only heard the introduction. I have another memory of the focused attention that Halim gave to the Dom throughout his talk. In the past, Sylvester had debated with Trungpa Tulku at an Aylesford Review Symposium and had often spoken to art students: and he had talked about Buddhism to monastic-linked Christian audiences. This was, however, the first time that he spoke on a religious (or spiritual) subject to a western audience that had come to listen to him from a non-dogmatic perspective.

On Easter day in 1974, or just before, I called on Dom Sylvester at Prinknash and went to the mid-day Office, followed by Mass, in the new monastery. A week later he wrote a long and friendly letter: with it were copies of the Preface of Passiontide for Easter in both Latin and in two variant English translations. 'Vere dignum ...', 'in truth it is right, always and everywhere to give thanks'. It marks the end of an eight-year correspondence that fills a substantial amount of a Lever Arch file. It consists partly of letters found in a box in my attic. In recent years when I had an opportunity to search his papers at the John Rylands University of Manchester Library, where they were held on behalf of the monks of Prinknash, I found more.

Through 1973 and 1974 I found myself moving in different direction to friends and colleagues who had come into my life since 1966. The changes led me to put aside the work that I had been doing with others in the field of experimental poetry. At about the time that I last saw Sylvester I heard it said that Bulent Rauf wanted to hold courses and something possessed me to offer the possibility of using the Warren. A week or two later, Bulent came with a companion to look around. It was the only time that he came there. In the summer it became known that a two-week course would be held at The Warren at the end of August. Peter Yiangou was put in charge: the youthful Frances von Marx came to stay a few days before it started to help with preparations. We were joined on the day by Adam Dupré, Alan Williams, the Californian Maren (Gleason) and John Thrift. Two courses followed in 1974, in October and in November/December, one led by Khalil Norland and the other by Grenville Collins. In the New Year, courses were taken by Richard Hornsby and by John Boyd Brent. My memory of the details of the later courses has faded to some extent. I do not remember the total number held at The Warren with any certainty, but it is possible that there were seven. The total number of people who came on them exceeded forty. I have a memory that may have lasted because I am sometimes reminded of it, that on one of the later courses in the summer of 1975 I made an arrangement with a local farmer at Monaughty that we would collect his hay bales and make a hayrick. It contributed a little to the funds. I can only say that I am profoundly grateful for the possibility and meaning of this series of two-week courses and for all that has followed. The first six-month course started at Chisholme in Autumn 1975.

I didn't see Dom Sylvester again until 3 February 1977. I was a student on the six-month course at Sherborne House in Gloucestershire from September 1976 to March 1977: he had come to give a talk. I don't remember if I spoke to him: there may not have been a suitable opportunity. In any case I was aware that it was most unlikely that he would recognize me. As a result of meningitis as an infant he suffered from prosopagnosia, an inability to recognize faces: he relied on other signals. It is likely that I kept a low profile.

To be continued ...