

Dom Sylvester Houédard¹

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It is a great pleasure to be in the company of so many people who want to share memories and to learn more about Dom Sylvester. And it is a privilege to be able to contribute to this event along with those of you who bring a professional interest and knowledge that I can't pretend to match.

What I really want to do is to talk not about Dom Sylvester's religious beliefs but about his spirituality. Religion has taken a bit of a hammering in the time through which I have lived. I happen to think that religion is one of the profoundest and most difficult mysteries. But if, with Dom Sylvester, we start with the premise that the human constitution is composed of both body and spirit, these two – it is greatly enriching to approach the meanings that life brings by admitting and thinking about that double nature: and so we can begin to understand that the essential spiritual nature of humanity is the truth in one of the fields of enquiry that gives meaning to the human presence. Bulent Rauf, I remember, who was consultant to the Beshara School, a man whom Dom Sylvester came to know well and greatly appreciated, pointed out that the soul of humanity has appeared in this era in three guises, spiritual, scientific and economic. But it is through the spiritual realities that meaning is derived.

I would only add to these introductory words the idea that the language we use is not the meaning. Language is like a moving stream: it has the trick of being able to slide from one situation to another. Words slide vertically, linking the different levels of parallel universes, as well as horizontally to create the illusion of continuous effect and the illusion that meaning is a thing.



For quite a long time I have been aware that I have had a degree of privileged access to Dom Sylvester, through meetings and friendship

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at 'Dom Sylvester Houédard and the Cosmic Typewriter', held at the South London Gallery on 2 December 2012.

in the second half of the '60s and into the '70s. And also later, through the Beshara School and the work he did with the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society in the 1980s, through all of which there are many friends today who knew him and remember him with affection. To these undoubted privileges I should add more recent contacts with some of the monks at Prinknash, and with others who didn't stay the full course as monastics. Above all I have enjoyed fresh opportunities to meet people I knew forty years ago in the contest of '60s culture and poetry. More recently it has sometimes seemed that Dom Sylvester himself was interceding between my extensive wish-list and Stella Halkyard, the Special Collections archivist at the John Rylands University of Manchester Library. And to that I have to add with great pleasure what I hope is only the start of new friendships that are being made this week-end.

MONK/POET

It must be the first time that the work of a Catholic monk has been celebrated in the context of a modern avant-garde movement. The only other possibility is that something similar happened at the time of the skilled illuminators of the early Middle Ages: the monks who illuminated the Book of Kells, for instance, were surely the avant-garde of their time. Dom Sylvester liked to position himself in a line of Benedictine poets and artists from, to quote him, 'the monastic literati of the ancient west who *created* civilization'. The latter is from his entry in the 1970, 1200-page volume *Contemporary Poets* from St James's Press.

What I find most remarkable about him is that he managed to avoid getting caught up in other people's preconceptions about religious people. He managed to project the image of both monk and poet, by just being himself. It would have taken you by surprise if that monk in white robes in your railway carriage, travelling to London, picked up his brief-case and walked out, and then five minutes later a figure returned, with the same brief-case, wearing round black shades and a beret, black polo-neck sweater and leather trousers. I have explained in my essay for the

monograph that is published today that for a monk, extra-mural activity was simply not an option. And yet Sylvester got away with something like it.

There is a moment in Peter Whitehead's film of the June '65 Albert Hall reading, when Sylvester appears on the screen as the lights fall on the front smoke-hazy row encircling the stage, while Ginsberg is reading. An iconic image, as the reversed black and white images caught on the cover of John Furnival's dsh Corsham folder are also iconic. And of course, he also appeared on one of Marina Warner's pages in *Vogue* magazine.

There is no doubt that throughout the poetry years both sides of this double-sided identity were always present, and it was as if it were second nature to him to be like this. To him the discipline of being a poet was parallel to the discipline of being a monk. The way that language could slide from meanings that came through monastic contemplation into the meanings realized by an enquiring poet impressed itself on him. Each resides at the very seat of creativity, each is ambiguous in its outlook: each has its own private spaces, white on black, that others can't touch and at the same time knows itself as co-existing fully with others in a changing world of light and shadow.

In a short piece he wrote in 1964 titled '*me as poet rather than critic*' (it was written for, but understandably not published, in the ICA bulletin), in the course of addressing this ambiguity Sylvester suggested that the 'poet is to society' as the 'monk is to the church'. I think it is possible, understanding that language fragments, and meaning appears in the creative mirror, to see how the poet may command the inner voice that leads society at every level. And equally, if the monk is doing his work as he should, the spirituality of the church becomes evident.

I have become convinced, however, that what Sylvester saw when he said church, which is literally the body of Christ, was the whole of humanity, without exception – and that this arises from the necessity of compassion or, one can equally say, of love. But having noted this, if we go back to the ambiguity of the poet/monk travelling to London on the train, I think we can start to see that they represent, for him, the two sides

that everyone who writes or composes or sculpts or paints has to face: the interior facing and the act of expression.

SPIRITUAL QUALITIES

Preparing this talk I found a note that I wrote earlier this year about particular qualities that are the marks of Sylvester's uniqueness. There are three that stood out for me:

- his unconventional approach to life combined with the fact that he never let that unconventionality slip;
- his intellectual clarity;
- the basic, essential Compassion (and generosity), to which we have just referred.

With respect to his unconventionality, and the fact that he applied it consistently, never letting up, perhaps we should start by looking at an example. I have heard that Dom Sylvester's gradual, the book he used in choir from which the liturgy of the day was chanted, was annotated in the greatest detail with the symbols (referred to as neumes, or signs of the hand) that were used in the centuries of the first millennium before linear tonal musical notation had been invented. Contemporary research, mainly published since Sylvester's death, has established the immense complexity of the subject. Anyhow, the story is that in the mid-1980s Dom Sylvester had persuaded his abbot, today Abbot Emeritus, Dom Aldhelm Cameron-Brown to agree to speak to the Ibn 'Arabi Society in Oxford on the subject of the *lumen deificum*, the Light of Divinity. At lunch the wife of one of the delegates started to talk to Abbot Aldhelm about Dom Sylvester. Dom Aldhelm asked her, 'Have you ever heard Dom Sylvester singing?' She replied, 'Well, no!', and Dom Aldhelm went on, 'Then, you're very lucky.' From other sources we know that the choir would sometimes become aware of Sylvester, in focused flight, pitching a strange falsetto in unaccustomed rhythms. Aldhelm's predecessor Abbot Dyfrig used to relate that when he asked Sylvester, 'Why don't you sing like the rest of us?', Sylvester answered,

‘If everyone else sang like me there’d be absolutely no problem.’

Everything about him was unconventional.

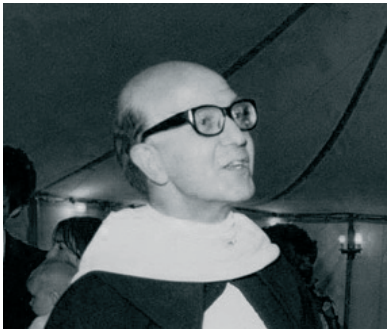
It was HOW he was. And that IS the point.

He refused to fit into a pigeon-hole, or a category.

It was how he was true to himself.

At the same time, ambiguous, once again, Sylvester emphasized the importance of tradition. If we do not understand the traditions to which we are born and with which we are cradled, how can we understand and welcome the truth that resides in others? Interestingly it is a point that the Dalai Lama makes, and made again in Manchester this summer.

In a talk called ‘The Gateless Gate’, given in 1985 in Germany at a conference on the future of ecumenical cooperation, Dom Sylvester



wrote: ‘To speak on one’s awareness of the Wider Ecumenism from the awareness of one’s own tradition, means that I am speaking as a catholic, as a monk, as a Benedictine of Prinknash and as a Guernseyman.’ Actually, the ethos of tradition is inherent to Sylvester’s way of thinking. We can see indications of it, for instance where he attributes both his own

and Bede Griffiths’ interest in what he called Wider Ecumenism to the founder of the Prinknash community, Aelred Carlyle. But tradition is only valid if it has its own universal necessity.

So what about his intellectual clarity?

Among the obituaries to him, I like to come back from time to time to one written by Martin Notcutt for the *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society*, in which Martin said, in a manner that is understated but subtle: ‘He was noted for his light and whimsical style, but underlying this was the insight which made his contacts so fruitful, and which enabled him, when necessary, to be instantly firm and direct in his rejection of arguments which appeared unsound.’ This clarity of mind is a quality that comes from what is perhaps more accurately described as ‘vision’: it is an

ability to see meaning (or absence of meaning), in spoken, or written words, without the interference of reflective thinking, as if the meaning itself was present. There is something in this that reminds me of the possibility that opens, like a gate, in moments of creativity.

I was very recently sent – by Marvin Sackner – a copy of a piece by Dom Sylvester that was to have been published in a magazine that I edited in 1973, called *Inocybe*. The copy for the first issue of this magazine was never printed and turned up as camera-ready artwork in Marvin’s extensive collection. There is a good example of the meaning of clarity of mind in Sylvester’s contribution.

I quote:

Like a good Buddhist i find something central in the analogy of mind & looking glass: practically everybody in the west learned 2 poems the very 1st day he heard the word ‘zen’ – in the 7th c shen hsui the prior of yellowplum-mountain wrote:

body-tree bodhi-tree
mind-mirror
so dust it

the cook (it’s always cooks you notice that turn out top even in western monasteries) was called hui-neng & he replied with:

no bodhi
no mirror
no dust
so no dusting



I hope that I have been able to convey here something of the spirit and insight with which Sylvester chose to go out into the changing cultural world of the early 1960s. In turning in that direction he was equally drawn by what he saw and heard. From Ginsberg and the new American poetry of the 1950s he saw glimpses of a new, post-war world that was ready to hear and express its inner voice: for social awareness, for new freedoms of expression, for generosity of spirit.

I have written at greater length in the monograph that is to be launched today about his vast respect for the Dalai Lama and his work with Tibetan

Buddhist monks and geshees – nominally through the Catholic organization with the acronym DIM – or inter-monastic dialogue.

But there was another movement that attracted his attention in the 1970s. That is Beshara.

At first he had a lot of reservations when in 1974 he was asked to visit and speak at the centre that had opened at Swyre Farm, in Gloucestershire. As time went on and the movement became more structured, and with Bulent Rauf as consultant, his attitude softened and he started to feel more at home with these people. The school has no religious ties and is free of dogma. This helped him to overcome earlier difficulties.

After he met Bulent, the tone of his background comments changed. Bulent persuaded him that though Sufism looks to Ibn ‘Arabi, it is to Ibn ‘Arabi that one must look to find the spiritual knowledge that can bring the three religions of the Abrahamic tradition together.

I think that this is all that I have time for. However, in the outcome of his relationship with the Beshara School, and with the Ibn ‘Arabi Society subsequently founded in Oxford by Bulent Rauf, of which Sylvester was an honorary member, there is a substantial body of work, given in the company of people who became extremely fond of him and of his ways. If there is an ambiguity in this arrangement for Dom Sylvester, similar to those I have described in relation to the world of poetry and in relation to Buddhism, it lies only in the degrees of Compassion to which each aspires. For the purpose of this paper, however, it is probably sufficient to consider that Sylvester’s relationship with Bulent, the Ibn ‘Arabi Society and the Beshara School was one of full participatory dialogue, for the single purpose of spiritual knowledge and self-realization, as should also be the case between all of these and the Dalai Lama.



To finish by quoting Sylvester:

Bang, said God
Bang, bang! Said I
We are both a bit crazy

