2.4 The Incapable Medium in John Jeremiah Sullivan's "Upon This Rock" (2012)

Despite the critical praise that it has garnered, John Jeremiah Sullivan's writing has evaded the attention of critical scholarly analysis to date. However, his essays and reportage have been reviewed in different media outlets and Sullivan has given interviews about his writing. Upon its initial publication in 2011, Sullivan's essay collection *Pulphead* (2011) received rave reviews. The book was hailed as: "the best, and most important, collection of magazine writing since [David Foster] Wallace's *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*."[1] Sullivan himself was praised as: "a writer interested in human stories, watching, remembering, and sticking around long enough to be generally hospitable to otherness."[2] Sullivan himself admits to being inspired by Wallace.[3] However, his perspective on life is more conciliatory and relaxed than Wallace's. In an interview with the British magazine *New Statesman*, he stated:

> My view of life tends to be that everybody is stuck in a more or less absurd and tragic situation, just by virtue of the reality of death, if nothing else. So I don't think of it as a great moral deed to extend empathy and compassion to people who wouldn't otherwise seem to deserve it. I'm not surprised people end up weird and hobbled.[4]

Sullivan's ethical stance connects to a similarly relaxed epistemological position. As he stated in an interview with the *Sewanee Review* in 2018, truth, for him, is not attainable but can only be worked towards in a performative

1 Kraus, "Examining Pop Culture's Heroes, and Himself."
2 Wood, "Reality Effects: John Jeremiah Sullivan's Essays."
3 Roiland, "Derivative Sport: The Journalistic Legacy of David Foster Wallace."
4 Derbyshire, "John Jeremiah Sullivan."

process, which one can fail at, because of the limitedness of our very human brains.[5] Viewing truth as virtually unattainable for Sullivan, is:

> only problematic if you believe that truth's remoteness from our reality gives you permission to fuck around. And that's not what I believe at all. I see the top of the mountain from a distance. Some kind of absolute is probably there. I believe it's there. And I'm pretty positive we can't reach it, or even get close enough to wield it without hurting ourselves, without fooling ourselves. Writers keep trying to climb the mountain, if they're serious. For one thing, it's less boring. And also, why wouldn't you want to be less of an idiot?[6]

Importantly, then, for Sullivan, the limits of human physicality have specific consequences in which the categories of ethics and epistemology cannot be kept apart.

Sullivan expresses this stance of virtual incapability prominently in *Pulphead's* first essay, "Upon This Rock," which was previously published in a slightly different version in *GQ* in 2004. For the piece, Sullivan travels to a Christian rock festival in rural Pennsylvania. As scholars have maintained, at Christian rock festivals—essentially managed leisure events—the attendants' communing can produce interpersonal authenticity through a shared experience of liminality, youthful impressionability, and embodied performativity.[7] In the highly self-reflective text, however, Sullivan paints a more ambivalent picture of the communing taking place at the festival. On the one hand, the text can be read as a somewhat remorseful acknowledgement of Sullivan's personal inability to believe in God and, hence, to experience the sense of *communitas* that is being forged at the festival. On the other hand, Sullivan describes the production of his experience—different from the planned and managed production of the festival itself—as collective and uncertain, but no less full of possibility. On a symbolic level, Sullivan's personal inability to believe mirrors his personal inability to make clear sense of his overall experience as a medium between the believing festivalgoers and his readers. On a material level, Sullivan's personal inability to produce his experience corresponds intentionally and singlehandedly to his inability to share the unified and predetermined experience of his fellow festivalgoers. Ultimately, then, his self-reflection

5 Hill, "A Conversation with John Jeremiah Sullivan," 53–54.

6 Hill, 54.

7 Pastoor et al., "Rock of Our Salvation: Ideological Production at the Christian Youth Music Festival."

exemplarily maps out the limits of individual human agency in the symbolic and material making of reality precisely by way of depicting (religious) belief as the main interpersonal mediator. In his telling, the symbolic and material are inevitably interlocked in his very physical existence.

This physical integration comes with a thematic inversion. Sullivan reflects so intensively upon his own role in the process of constructing an argument about experiencing Christian rock that this metanarrative about the production of meaning turns into the main story. This self-reflection of Sullivan as a human medium is manifested in three key points. First, Sullivan characterizes his experience at the Creation festival as having been accidentally produced. Second, as the main vehicle for making sense of the experience at the Creation festival, Sullivan resorts to the memory of his own stint as an evangelical. Third, Sullivan characterizes the contingent communicative relationship with his readers as more susceptible to inaccuracy than his physical perceptions.

The Willing Recruit Themselves: Experience as (Near) Accident

In contrast to the predetermination associated with journalistic or touristic experience, Sullivan depicts the actual experience at the festival as almost unintentional. He details how the initial planning of his trip failed in different ways. Rather than being the product of personal initiative and careful planning, his experience turns out to be the result of a curious sequence of human interactions, at the end of which a near accident prompts the very interactions with young Christian believers that he had initially been seeking. By prominently laying out the conditions governing his research at the very beginning of the text, Sullivan emphasizes their importance for the resulting experience. In his ironic telling, Sullivan was simply unable to follow through on his pre-established plans, due to his own weakness vis-à-vis challenges by capitalism and media technology. As a medium, then, Sullivan does not characterize himself as a shrewdly calculating journalist, but rather as the fortunate benefactor of other humans' willingness to interact.

Sullivan discards two plans before attending the Christian rock festival. The first plan is only ever imaginary, and Sullivan does not even try to realize it. In the outline of this plan, Sullivan would have played the role of a distanced observer who places himself: "at the edge of the crowd and take notes on

the scene."[8] He imagines his experience at the festival as an almost industrial act, involving a pre-planned gathering of pieces brought together purely for the sake of money. He even sees the writing process following his time at the festival as ironically rational: "Fly home, stir in statistics. Paycheck."[9] Interestingly, however, Sullivan characterizes this imagined industrial rationality as unprofessional. While it might pay him, it would not play to his professional pride, since the industry does not: "give out awards for that toe-tap foolishness."[10] For a professional like Sullivan, it is clearly not enough to make money as a writer, that is, to have his writing mediated by monetary compensation. Acknowledging his human vanity, Sullivan strives for a kind of reward beyond monetary compensation: a materialized form of respect that only other humans could give him via their recognition.

Sullivan's second plan is based on intentionally produced human interaction resulting from his personal initiative. This plan goes awry because its execution is mediated by technology. In an online search in chat forums, which he appears unable to perform, Sullivan fails to find willing festivalgoers to go with him. Sullivan posts advertisements for his rideshare online that are met with suspicion. One of them says: "I'm looking for a few serious fans of Christian rock to ride to the festival with me… Male/female doesn't matter, though you shouldn't be older than, say, 28, since I'm looking at this primarily as a youth phenomenon."[11] Eventually, Sullivan states, the potential festivalgoers:

> stopped chatting with me and started chatting among themselves, warning one another about me. Finally one poster on the official Relient K site hissed at the others to stay away from my scheme, as I was in all likelihood 'a 40 year old kidnapper.' Soon I logged on and found that the moderators of the site had removed my post and its lengthening thread of accusations altogether, offering no explanation… I called my lawyer, in Boston, who told me to 'stop using computers' (his plural).[12]

Again, Sullivan presents himself as almost too human to follow through with his plan, as this would entail an ability to create trust in a communicative situation mediated by computers. If pride prevents him from following through

8 Sullivan, "Upon This Rock," 3.
9 Sullivan, 3.
10 Sullivan, 3.
11 Sullivan, 4.
12 Sullivan, 5–6.

on his first idea, it is the very absence of his physical humanity in these online postings that appears to raise the suspicion of him to the other potential festival attendees. Reflecting upon these issues, Sullivan quickly establishes a tension between himself, as a decidedly human medium, and the very calculating, economic aspects of his research, such as planning, compensation, and casting.

In the absence of his own personal capabilities, Sullivan relies upon interpersonal cooperation. When he ultimately arrives at the festival, he does so only with the help of others. First, following the abandonment of his second plan, Sullivan wins support from *GQ* magazine's assistant editor, whom he describes as being better at using the internet than he is (the editor discovers, for example, that Sullivan was actually planning to attend the wrong festival). It is the editor who gets Sullivan a vehicle to drive to the festival and a place to stay while there.[13] The big RV does not meet all of Sullivan's requirements, but in their exchanges the editor manages to overcome Sullivan's reservations: "Once I reached the place, we agreed (for he led me to think he agreed), I would certainly be able to downgrade to something more manageable."[14] Unable to make arrangements and decisions by himself, Sullivan commits to actually going to this new festival called Creation only because of the assistant editor's efforts and dedication to the idea of Sullivan attending the festival.

Second, Sullivan also describes Debbie and Jack, the couple who lend him the RV, as gently pushing him towards attending the festival. Sullivan characterizes them as genuinely human, Debbie with a: "face as sweet as a birthday cake beneath spray-hardened bangs"[15] and Jack as: "tattooed, squat, gray-mulleted, spouting open contempt for MapQuest."[16] Like Sullivan who has had a bad experience with computers, Jack trusts humans more than technology: "He'd be giving me real directions."[17] Ultimately, following a tour with instructions around the vehicle, it is Jack who exemplarily shows Sullivan the way: "Jack pulled down the step and climbed aboard. It was really happening."[18] Of course, Sullivan's emphasis on both his editor's and the RV lenders' agency marks himself out as being overly and unrealistically passive in all his

13 Sullivan, 6–7.
14 Sullivan, 6–7.
15 Sullivan, 7.
16 Sullivan, 7.
17 Sullivan, 7.
18 Sullivan, 8.

preparations for the trip. This passiveness, however, has to be read as a form of irony. This irony creates a sense of distance between Sullivan and reality, since reality appears to produce Sullivan's experience by itself and Sullivan is only very passively present in it. Furthermore, since this irony emphasizes Sullivan's own lack of will and intention, it points to the crucial role of intention in the creation of a narrative about reality. This irony very much foregrounds the question of Sullivan's personal individual agency because it makes the absence of intention appear strange.

Third, he describes his discovery of the Christian youth, he had originally envisioned himself travelling to the festival with, as something fundamentally unintended. In attempting to prevent Sullivan from causing an accident with his huge vehicle, they practically recruit themselves. What is key to their encounter is precisely the oversized RV. While Sullivan is uncomfortable with the vehicle because it deprives him of individual agency, he also identifies it as the very reason why the interaction he is seeking with the other festivalgoers ends up taking place. As he tries to find his camping spot, Sullivan is helped by teenage volunteers, whose guidance he more than appreciates:

> They pulled out their walkie-talkies. Some time went by. It got darker. Then an even younger boy rode up on a bike and winked a flashlight at me, motioning I should follow. It was such a comfort to yield up my will to this kid. All I had to do was not lose him. His vest radiated a warm, reassuring officialdom in my headlights. Which may be why I failed to comprehend in time that he was leading me up an almost vertical incline. [19]

The need for help that makes necessary the yielding of his will that Sullivan describes here is entirely the result of the enormous size of his vehicle. At the same time, his dependence on the guide, as well as the near-accident that follows are intimately connected and lead to another encounter. As the RV briefly skids down toward the tents of other festivalgoers and Sullivan anticipates a horrible accident, he suddenly receives instructions from a stranger and his vehicle is being pushed up the hill from behind by a group of young West Virginians. These youths end up becoming the group that he will spend the following days at Creation with:

19 Sullivan, 11.

> I'd assumed that my days at Creation would be fairly lonely and end with my ritual murder. But these West Virginia guys had such warmth. It flowed out of them. They asked me what I did and whether I liked sassafras tea and how many others I'd brought with me in the RV. Plus they knew a dude who died horribly and was from a state with the same name as the river I grew up by, and I'm not the type who questions that sort of thing. [20]

Here, the contact with young believers that Sullivan was not able to make online appears as a gift, an act of pure kindness as Sullivan appears to do nothing other than appear vulnerable.

The narrative about how Sullivan produces the experience at the Christian rock festival in the first place is, then, already one of collective action that stands in sharp contrast to the idea of the writer as an individual genius, who both intentionally researches and tells a good story. Sullivan clearly characterizes himself as a lowly, comparably powerless medium, one who is dependent on the help and even the initiative of others, such as his editor, the RV renters, volunteers, and other festivalgoers. The communal experience he has at the festival is not the result of intentional planning, but of human collaboration, kindness, and, ultimately, the collective will to prevent an accident. This makes Sullivan appear as an ironically passive observer, who diverges from the stereotypical journalistic objectivity that observes and records like a camera, unconcerned with its own influence on reality. As a medium, Sullivan is highly aware that he influences and, to a certain degree, produces the experience of reality he needs in order to tell a good story. At least initially, his account of incompetently stumbling into the experience becomes the story and sets the tone for the narration of the experience of the festival itself.

The Accepting Writer Anticipates a Doubtful Reader

In contrast to this meta-plot, Sullivan describes the experience of attending the festival itself as more actively produced by himself and through his mere physical presence. Reflecting upon the sensory perceptions that form his experience, Sullivan generally appears to have confidence in his senses and, hence, in his own raw or technical abilities as a medium. Nevertheless, he emphasizes how his senses are still mediated by his will and, thus, how his mind and body are

20 Sullivan, 14.

interconnected. More specifically, reflecting on his own mediality, he describes the material making of reality as rather reliable, compared to the more complicated symbolic workings that mediate it. It is not that his eyes or ears might betray him, but that the workings of his senses are directed and given meaning by himself; whether or not he tells a story about reality, in turn, is dependent on whether the reader trusts him.

To begin with, Sullivan repeatedly reflects on how his will determines his experience, and thus how the story he tells is ultimately anchored in his own subjectivity. As an example of the power of his will to perceive, he foregrounds his perceptions as potentially unwelcome and hints at the possibility of blocking them out, thereby signaling their actively selected character to the reader. For instance, during the handover of the RV, Jack, the lender, gives him a tour of the vehicle, which Sullivan describes as disturbing:

> We toured the outskirts of my soon-to-be-mausoleum. It took time. Every single thing Jack said, somehow, was the only thing I'd need to remember. White water, gray water, black water (drinking, showering, le devoir). Here's your this, never ever that. Grumbling about "weekend warriors." I couldn't listen, because listening would mean accepting it as real, though his casual mention of the vast blind spot in the passenger-side mirror squeaked through, as did his description of the "extra two feet on each side" – the bulge of my living quarters – which I wouldn't be able to see but would want to "be conscious of" out there.[21]

Here, Sullivan hints at a connection between will and consciousness, almost casually arguing that his paying attention is, at least in this case, intentional and that whatever is being said could also simply be ignored. Later on, shortly after having met the West Virginia guys, he hints at a similar connection between his own will to perceive and the consequences of this perception. Writing about the walk to the first concert at the festival, Sullivan states: "I suspect that on some level – the conscious one, say – I didn't want to be noticing what I noticed as we went."[22] Once again, Sullivan casually connects his own consciousness with both a will to notice and the consequence of what he notices. In both instances, he has to deal with unwanted perceptions. Yet, in neither case does he attribute

21 Sullivan, 7–8.

22 Sullivan, 16.

any agency to the senses, concentrating it rather in his will. Thus, he emphasizes that his sensory perceptions are actively selected. While this exhibition of self-reflection makes his judgment appear weak, he raises consciousness to the rank of master selector, which not only selects, but also reflects on what is not selected and why.

In a similar way, Sullivan casually comments about how his assertions about reality are also, in turn, influenced by other impressions and thoughts. For instance, he characterizes one member of the group, Ritter, as a guy who "could burst a pineapple in his armpit and chuckle about it (or so I assume)."[23] This active declaration of his own statement as mere assumption similarly weakens the force of his judgment. Of course, the use of the subjunctive already indicates that it is an assumption, making it appear to be mere irony. Once again, the cluster of similar asides suggests a more conscious emphasis on self-reflection. Only a few lines later, Sullivan writes about another boy, Darius, that the: "projection of his jaw from the lump of snuff he kept there made him come off a bit contentious, but I felt sure he was just high-strung."[24] Sullivan here attributes his own assertion about Darius to a mere feeling. Towards the end of the text, Sullivan overtly acknowledges that such descriptions of characters are mainly based on his own feelings and, more basically, his will to feel:

> I sat in the driver's seat and watched, through tinted glass, little clusters of Christians pass. They looked like people anywhere, only gladder, more self-contained. Or maybe they just looked like people anywhere. I don't know. I had no pseudo-anthropological moxie left.[25]

By basing his judgment on "moxie" and actively refusing to judge, due to a lack of energy, Sullivan once again attributes the main agency in his perception of reality to his will. Here, however, he goes even farther. He signals that even his description of reality is dependent on his fundamental will to describe, and ultimately on his physical energy. In conclusion, he paints himself as the teller of a story, whose coherence is provided simply by the very body of the teller himself. While this may make it unique, it also places the story—a story that,

23 Sullivan, 13.
24 Sullivan, 13.
25 Sullivan, 35.

after all, is supposed to be about a real experience of reality—on a supposedly flimsy evidential basis.

It only matters that when Sullivan describes himself as weak, but is also accepting of this weakness, he in turn anticipates a reader who will doubt these assertions. Addressing the reader directly, Sullivan signals that he also understands the relationship with him or her to be based on a mere will to interact and believe. For instance, while waiting in line next to a pickup truck with teenage girls, Sullivan makes an observation that he anticipates the reader might not believe:

> Their line of traffic lurched ahead, and an old orange Datsun came up beside me. I watched as the driver rolled down her window, leaned halfway out, and blew a long, clear note on a ram's horn. I understand where you might be coming from in doubting that. Nevertheless it is what she did. I have it on tape.[26]

Similar to other passages that have been quoted, this one has an ironic undertone, because the blowing of the horn that Sullivan purports to have witnessed and claims to have on tape is rather unspectacular. By contrast, Sullivan narrates a much more dramatic event—the death of a man standing next to him—in a rather straightforward way, without commenting on the plausibility of the episode for the reader.[27] Hence, Sullivan's assurance that he has a recording of the scene appears quite out of proportion and rather makes fun of its potential epistemological function as evidence.

However, the direct reader address can also be read as a casual reminder that the reader is more generally dependent on Sullivan's word. Throughout the text, Sullivan inserts similar comments and interjections directed at the reader. For instance, when he tells the reader about first driving through the festival grounds, Sullivan notes: "It's hard to put across the sensory effect of that many people living and moving around in the open: part family reunion, part refugee camp."[28] Later, Sullivan makes a similar aside about the difficulty of conveying a particular perception, when he tells the reader about how a speaker yelled out from a stage: "If I were to try to convey to you how loudly he

26 Sullivan, 9.
27 Sullivan, 36.
28 Sullivan, 11.

shrieked this, you'd think I was playing wordy games."[29] Elsewhere, Sullivan also comments on potential contradictions in his story when, after having given a report of tensions involving the West Virginia guys, he acknowledges that the reader might be put off by his account: "I admit that these tales of the West Virginia guys' occasional truculence might appear to gainsay what I claimed earlier about 'not one word spoken in anger,' et cetera. But it was playful."[30] Taken together, these comments directed at the reader all come across as clues from Sullivan that he is aware of his role as medium and especially his transmitting function. This self-reflection in turn signals to the reader that he or she is merely reading the produced account of a medium struggling to put his experience into words, and not an immediate, unambiguous representation of real events.

Past and Future to Make Sense of the Present

Sullivan extends his self-reflection to encompass how he makes sense of the experience. And just like the material making of the experience itself, this symbolic making of meaning by way of imagination and memory is ultimately anchored in his body. In part, the experience at the festival draws Sullivan away from the present, as it prompts him to remember the past and to imagine the future. In place of a detailed rendering of his personal experience at the festival, Sullivan mainly tells the story of why he cannot be a true Christian himself, via what he calls a "memory voyage"[31] into his youth. Similar to the story about how the experience was accidentally produced, he expands on how his making sense of the experience is anchored in his very personal and subjective memory, being produced internally. In a similar way, Sullivan inserts hypothetical prolepses, imagined future events that might be seen as potential consequences of his actions in the present that provide meaning to his experience.

Sullivan's flashback plays a key role in his sensemaking. It works as a reference for the narrative of the experience at the festival, as there are clear parallels between the two. In both cases, Sullivan tells the story of his being attracted by a group of young believers. The reasons for this attraction are similar. First

29 Sullivan, 36.
30 Sullivan, 23.
31 Sullivan, 26.

of all, the groups are both characterized as authentic by way of their unapologetic self-awareness as passionate believers. When he first meets the group at the festival, for example, Ritter says that they were: "just a bunch of West Virginia guys on fire for Christ."[32] Later, Darius asks Sullivan to write in the text: "that we love God."[33] Sullivan elevates this self-characterization toward one of the clearest and simplest points he makes in the text, when he adds that: "I would have said it even if Darius hadn't asked me to, it may be the truest thing I will have written here: they were crazy, and they loved God."[34] When looking back at the group he joined in his teenage years, Sullivan similarly states he was drawn to Evangelicalism because of the sense of zeal it exuded: "The sheer passionate engagement of it caught my imagination: nobody had told me there were Christians like this. They went at the Bible with grad-seminar intensity, week after week."[35]

Another attractive quality of both groups to Sullivan is their appreciation for good music. Sullivan writes how he is dazzled by Darius' piano skills[36] and how the communal play in his RV during a rainstorm tightened their bond.[37] In similar ways, Sullivan attributes a key role to music in his affiliation with the evangelical group of his youth. He notes that he swapped music tapes with the group's leader[38] and that there was a bonfire after prayer sessions where the guitar "went around."[39] Music also serves Sullivan as a means of illustrating the tolerance for difference exhibited by both groups, when he writes that the West Virginians at Creation "were up for secular stuff."[40] Additionally, the fact that they find out rather early on that Sullivan is on a professional assignment, but still unconditionally welcome him into their group, marks them out as tolerant. Sullivan also explicitly characterizes the group he belonged to as a teenager as tolerant, when he notes that "they were accepting of every kind of weirdness"[41] and that they respected his reasons for ultimately leaving the group.[42] Thus,

32 Sullivan, 13.
33 Sullivan, 40.
34 Sullivan, 40.
35 Sullivan, 27–28.
36 Sullivan, 24.
37 Sullivan, 39.
38 Sullivan, 27.
39 Sullivan, 29.
40 Sullivan, 39.
41 Sullivan, 27.
42 Sullivan, 32.

Sullivan's memory voyage adds argumentative fodder to his narrative of his experience at the festival and strengthens his characterization of a particular branch of Evangelicals as passionate, tolerant humans.

However, the retrospection also works on a formal level, as a comparably solid point of reference for the complicated meaning that Sullivan constructs at Creation. Compared to the metatextual passages filled with irony analyzed above, Sullivan's voice here appears clear, unequivocal, and self-assured. The few instances in which Sullivan employs metatextual comments are the result of a concern for the privacy of the characters in the story[43] and to avoid boring the reader with too much information.[44] Nowhere does Sullivan comment on the nature of memory itself or lament an inability to remember. Notably, however, he admits on one occasion that his memory is incomplete, when referring to an event at the festival itself.[45] Thus, he also asserts his memory as a reality on a formal level. Similar to his trust in his own senses then, the attribution of meaning to his memory appears more interesting than the identification of its fundamentally aesthetic quality, because the authority ascribed to it affirms its embodied materiality.

However, Sullivan does not just draw on past, remembered experiences to make sense of the present ones. Twice, he imagines future, hypothetical consequences of his present actions. Like his memories, these fictional, imagined scenarios illustrate the highly mediated emotional process of giving meaning to present experience. When given a tour of the RV prior to his drive to Creation, for instance, Sullivan has a foreboding vision of: "my loved ones gathered in a mahogany-paneled room to watch this footage; them being forced to hear me say, 'What if I never use the toilet – do I still have to switch on the water?'"[46] In a comparable passage, referring to the near-accident, Sullivan imagines that his having rented the big RV would have terrible consequences: "Laid out below and behind me was a literal field of Christians, toasting buns and playing guitars, fellowshipping. The aerial shot in the papers would show a long scar, a swath through their peaceful tent village."[47] In both passages, of course, Sullivan anticipates his present actions as having sinister consequences. Could he really have felt so pessimistic and afraid? Again, to read both passages as mere

43 Sullivan, 26.
44 Sullivan, 29.
45 Sullivan, 12.
46 Sullivan, 8.
47 Sullivan, 12.

irony serving to signify the author's weakness would miss half the point. On a meta-textual level, the acts of cautious or fearful presaging also draw attention to themselves as acts of narrative sensemaking in respect of the present. In both cases, Sullivan imagines potential events in the future as reference points, in order to give meaning to feelings prompted by his experience at the festival.

In Sullivan's piece, then, both remembered past and imagined future narratives are used to comment on the central narrative about the writer's experience at the festival. They add to the impression of the text as both a commentary on an experience of Evangelicalism and a commentary on the very construction of a commentary on the experience of Evangelicalism. Furthermore, as a human medium's self-reflection, they also emphasize a human medium's distinct qualities of embodied memory and imagination.

Strong Weakness

As I have sought to demonstrate, Sullivan's narrative of an experience of Evangelicalism, as well as his meta-narrative, are by no means cleanly separable, because they are embodied in Sullivan's persona. If, on a meta-narrative level, Sullivan portrays himself as weak and unable to produce meaningful experience, then it is this exact weakness that enables him to make the connection with the West Virginia guys in the main narrative. It also signifies the aestheticization of weakness that he claims to admire in Jesus, when he states that not in: "what conquers, not in glory, but in what's fragile and what suffers – there lies sanity. And salvation."[48] In the text, this fragility is manifested in the different narratives Sullivan draws upon to make sense of his main experience, until he stops and designates one of them as basic and referential. It is also displayed in a use of irony that has a distancing effect, as Sullivan employs it to keep the realities of both his festival-going and the reader at arm's length. Sullivan's main concern is not with reality and its material objects, but with the symbolically negotiated relationships between them. Just as Evangelicalism is a story full of stories that believers tell themselves about reality, Sullivan's narrative about Evangelicalism is a story full of stories that he tells himself and his readers.

Similar to his view of Jesus, Sullivan aestheticizes his own weakness precisely by basking in his inability to believe in God in the same way as the fes-

48 Sullivan, 33.

tivalgoers do, but he does not revel in mere irony. The weakness he aestheticizes through his use of irony or the rendering of his inability to make and execute a plan has the potential to turn into a strength, because it opens the possibility for connection and collaboration. Towards the very end of the text, adding yet another form of narrative to make sense of the experience, Sullivan quotes a poem by the Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz that celebrates believers. "If one could only say it and mean it," Sullivan comments, thereby placing himself right outside of the circle of believers he has just spent time among, looking at them with an understanding that is grounded in an understanding of his own nature. Standing there, Sullivan is personating the position of a medium who has experienced not just in order to experience, but also in order to tell—possibly to believers.

Sullivan's very self-reflection as human medium illuminates the function of common belief in human communing that connects what is radically uncertain. As Sullivan ponders his own very human mediality not predicated upon religious belief, which seeks to make and transmit sense of reality alongside the experience of highly religious Evangelicalism, he maps out the need for an alternative kind of belief that potentially connects himself with his readers. His consolatory and nevertheless appreciative assessment of the believers at the festival illustrates the possibility of communing without religious belief as it stakes out a tolerant ethics of common fragility.