

Stephen Dunn

PHILIP BOOTH (1925–2007): A REMEMBRANCE

I've had a lot of luck in my life, but certainly among the luckiest was finding myself in Philip's workshop at Syracuse University in 1969. There was this impressive-looking, quite formal man who, on the first day of class introduced us to each other, never asking for our input. He had done his homework about our pasts, and referred to each of us as, say, Mr. Dunn or Mr. Levis. "Mr. Dunn is a graduate of Hofstra and comes to us from New York City via the corporate world, and lately from a year of living in Spain. Mr. Levis is from Fresno, California, and studied with Philip Levine and Robert Mezey," and so on until all seven of us were sketched. Remember, this was 1969, when formalities were under fire as were most semblances of authority. In a sense, he was introducing us to who he was, and when he spoke about our poems it was a further introduction to his character and principles. Though he was open to a variety of styles, he was not open to anything that smacked of posturing or easy cleverness, or any form of disingenuousness. He had not yet written his wonderful poem, "Not to Tell Lies," but he was, in effect, the embodiment of it. One of the most important lessons Philip taught—without overtly teaching it—was that writing poetry was not "creative writing"; it was an extension of one's life, a way of exploring what it felt like to be alive in one's body in a certain place at a certain time.

I never heard him refer to his mentor, Robert Frost, as other than Mr. Frost. I was acutely aware of this, which deterred me from calling him Philip for many years. I think I was in my early 40s before I ventured to call him Philip. In those years between 1969 and, say, 1980, when our relationship was moving toward friendship, I don't know what I called him, not Mr. Booth, but probably, "Hello," or "Hi"; those were his names. Nor did he give me permission to call him Philip. My guess is that he rather liked my little dance around the issue of boundaries, yet probably was pleased when I could finally call him by his first name. I mention this because he was a man, as you all no doubt know, of very defined boundaries.

For example, in my second year at Syracuse, my then-wife and I felt very honored to be invited to his house for drinks before dinner. I remember exactly how he framed the invitation: "Why don't you come around 4:30

and leave at a quarter to six.” Philip was wonderful company when he knew the social parameters in advance, somewhat fidgety company when he didn’t. Of course he had the great fortune of having Margaret for a wife. A man could afford a number of eccentricities if he had a Margaret to carry the day. I suspect Philip learned this early, and it became one of the factors in the freedom he felt in being selves rather than just self. Self was firmly rooted; the selves he placed under the scrutiny of the unsparing language of his poems. Margaret, his children, and Castine were the anchors—everything else was adrift. His poems, especially the ones from mid-career on, sought to find the words for that elusiveness. They are important poems; they echo the intensity of their making, they testify to a long war between passion and restraint, a war that was constantly being lost and won. He seemed amused by the ambiguities and paradoxes that resulted. That is, when he wasn’t being tormented by them.

For me, he was a great and important man. Over the years, I sent poems to him regularly. He liked some, but when he’d catch me being facile, one of his frequent criticisms would be, “Deepen your concerns.” You can get cosmetic criticism from many sources, but it’s rare to get what Philip had to offer: moral incisiveness, and the conviction that syntax was its evidence. Speaking of which, he hated the inexact, the careless. “That’s a shotgun, goddamnit, not a rifle!!” he wrote in the margin of one of my poems. He kept you honest by exemplifying the struggle to be honest. And what’s even more rare: the older he got the more generous spirited he became. Philip Booth had a good run on this earth. ☞