

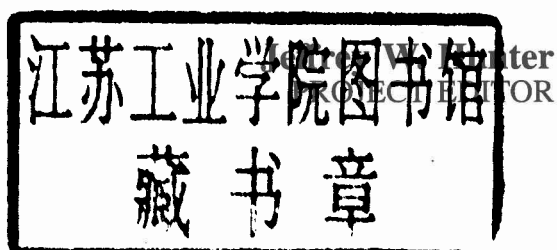
☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 206

Volume 206

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers





Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 206

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Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
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- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

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Stephen Dunn

1939-

(Full name Stephen Elliot Dunn) American poet and essayist.

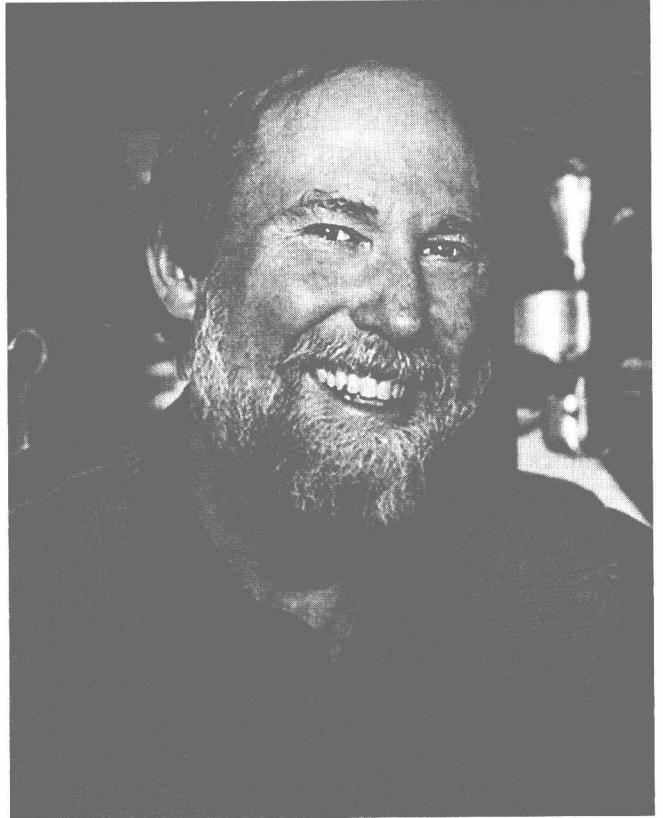
The following entry provides an overview of Dunn's career through 2003. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volume 36.

INTRODUCTION

Dunn is among the most highly respected American poets in contemporary literature. His poems, based on personal experience, usually relate a miniature story or anecdote in a plain, colloquial, conversational voice. Through his poetic persona, Dunn examines the experiences of a middle-class suburban man grappling with issues of love, marriage, family, domesticity, and the details of daily life. He often highlights tensions between the comforts of a middle-class lifestyle and the persistent awareness of violence and suffering throughout the larger world. "My poems tell stories, although they're very *short* stories," Dunn told an interviewer. "I would say there is a strong sense of the dramatic situation in almost every poem I write. There's always a starting point in the observable world, the world full of things that you have to pay attention to and take account of. I don't know if this comes to 'story' in the traditional sense, but my 'stories' are built around some kind of emotional fulcrum and try to be illustrative of a particular emotion." Dunn is the winner of the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for his poetry volume *Different Hours* (2000).

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Dunn was born June 24, 1939, in New York City. He grew up in Forest Hills, a community in the borough of Queens, and attended Hofstra University, graduating in 1962 with a B.A. in history. Dunn then played professional basketball with the Williamsport (Pennsylvania) Billies for one season, after which, from 1963 to 1966, he worked as a promotional brochure writer for the National Biscuit Company in New York City. In 1964, he married Lois Ann Kelly, a yoga teacher and chef, with whom he has two children. From 1964 to 1966, Dunn attended a graduate program in the New School for Social Research. He worked as an assistant editor at Ziff-Davis Publishing Company in New York from 1967



to 1968, and enrolled in the creative writing program at Syracuse University, graduating with an M.A. in 1970. There he studied under such poets as Philip Booth, Donald Justice, and W. D. Snodgrass. Since then, Dunn has taught as a lecturer and professor of creative writing at various colleges and universities, including Southwestern Minnesota State University (1970-73) and Syracuse University (1973-74). Since 1974, he has held a post as professor of creative writing at Richard Stockton State College in Pomona, New Jersey. He has also served as an adjunct professor at Columbia University, from 1983 to 1987, and has taught as a visiting professor at the University of Washington (1980) and University of Michigan (2000).

MAJOR WORKS

Dunn's style, themes, and poetic voice have remained relatively constant throughout his career. His earlier works of the 1970s, collected in *Looking for Holes in*

the Ceiling (1974), *Full of Lust and Good Usage* (1976), and *A Circus of Needs* (1978), established his characteristic formal style, while exploring themes of male-female relationships and cultural alienation coupled with a strong sense of humor, irony, and optimism. *Local Time* (1986), generally regarded as Dunn's first mature work, explores themes of marital strife and domesticity. In poems such as "He/She" and "After the Argument" he portrays the intricate dynamics of a marital argument, exploring the subtle and complex differences between the male and female perspectives. *Between Angels* (1989) includes several poems, such as the title poem and "Guardian Angel," that describe angels as everyday men and women inhabiting middle-class suburban America. *Between Angels* also includes a section of ten poems titled with single-word concepts such as "Happiness," "Sadness," "Loneliness," "Meaninglessness," and "Disappointment." In the 1990s Dunn began to include an occasional longer poem with his generally shorter poems. *Landscape at the End of the Century* (1991) ends with the fourteen-page poem "Loves," in which Dunn meditatively depicts the various things he loves about life and the world around him. *New and Selected Poems* (1994), a collection of more than 150 poems, includes selections from his previous volumes, as well as a series of new poems titled "The Snowmass Cycle." *Loosestrife* (1996) includes a long title poem in ten sections. In *Riffs and Reciprocities* (1998), Dunn experiments with prose poetry, constructing two-paragraph poems based on pairs of contrasting concepts, such as "Obstinacy/Principles," and "Passion/Paradox." In his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Different Hours*, Dunn's familiar themes and style take on a somewhat darker tone, as the poems explore middle age, mortality, and disappointment. "Before the Sky Darkens," the opening poem of *Different Hours*, begins: "More and more you learn to live / with the unacceptable." In "Sixty," the poet reflects on his own aging process, commenting, "in my family the heart goes first / and hardly anybody makes it out of his fifties." Tackling events in the broader world outside of comfortable suburban life, "Oklahoma City" describes Dunn's response to news reports of the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building as he drives to a cocktail party in suburban New Jersey. In "A Postmortem Guide," Dunn offers advice to an imaginary eulogist, confessing, "The truth is / I learned to live without hope / as well as I could, almost happily." *Local Visitations* (2003) begins with a sequence of poems, including "Sisyphus in the Suburbs," in which the mythical Sisyphus appears as an ordinary middle-aged man shopping for Christmas presents in the modern-day New Jersey suburbs. In another sequence, Dunn imagines "Great Nineteenth-Century Writers," such as Charles Dickens, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charlotte Brontë, and others inhabiting New Jersey in the twenty-first century. "Dickens in Pleas-

antville," for example, makes reference to the famous opening line of *A Tale of Two Cities*, with Dunn's reversal, "It is neither the best nor the worst of times."

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Dunn first gained widespread critical acclaim when *Local Time* was selected for the National Poetry Series award in 1986. His many subsequent volumes met with increasing admiration, as critics noted the maturing of his style, perspective, and insight with each new volume, culminating in his 2001 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Different Hours*. Dunn has been widely praised for his use of a poetic voice characterized by plain, conversational speech that conveys deep layers of meaning beneath a deceptively simple surface. Helen Vendler, in a review of *Local Time*, observed, "At his best, Dunn encodes mystery in speech that remains plain vocabulary, while doing syntactic and structural justice to psychological complexity." Judith Kitchen, in a review of *Different Hours*, similarly remarked that Dunn "combines an ease of grace and wit, a simplicity of diction, and a rhythmical flow so that, neither image-laden nor highly metaphorical, still his poems manage to mean more than they say." Dunn has been hailed as a chronicler of middle-class suburban life in the late twentieth century. He has often been compared to the prose writer Raymond Carver. As Bill Christophersen averred in a review of *Different Hours*, "Stephen Dunn's poetry is like Raymond Carver's short fiction in that both chronicle suburban life and domestic relationships in an unpretentious language that nonchalantly invests the mundane with meaning." Critics observed that Dunn's more recent volumes, including *Different Hours* and *Local Visitations*, express a darker, more melancholy mood as he brings deeper insight to his characteristic themes. Donna Seaman, reviewing *Local Visitations*, asserted that Dunn's "wit, command of language and form, and laser-sharp discernment of the human condition have never been keener than in his twelfth and thrillingly lucid collection." Dunn has occasionally been criticized for writing poems that are safe and predictable, avoiding risks in what they express. For example, David Wojahn, in a review of *Between Angels*, stated, "As good as Dunn always is, his strategies can grow repetitious, exhibiting a sameness of both theme and technique. His genial hand wringing may indeed make him a kind of Everyman from Exurbia, but his poems often limit themselves to overly strict emotional parameters."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

5 Impersonations (poetry) 1971
Looking for Holes in the Ceiling (poetry) 1974
Full of Lust and Good Usage (poetry) 1976

A Circus of Needs (poetry) 1978
Work and Love (poetry) 1981
Not Dancing (poetry) 1984
Local Time (poetry) 1986
Between Angels (poetry) 1989
Landscape at the End of the Century (poetry) 1991
Walking Light: Essays and Memoirs (essays) 1993;
 revised as *Walking Light: Memoirs and Essays on Poetry*, 2001
New and Selected Poems: 1974-1994 (poetry) 1994
Loosestrife (poetry) 1996
Riffs and Reciprocities: Prose Pairs (poetry) 1998
Different Hours (poetry) 2000
Local Visitations (poetry) 2003
Insistence of Beauty (poetry) 2004

CRITICISM

Stephen Dunn and Sanford Pinsker (interview date 23 July 1982)

SOURCE: Dunn, Stephen, and Sanford Pinsker. "Acts of Clarifications: A Conversation with Stephen Dunn about Process and Poetry." *Missouri Review* 7, no. 1 (fall 1983): 59-69.

[In the following interview, conducted on July 23, 1982, Dunn discusses literary craftsmanship, poetic voice, and the use of humor in poetry.]

Stephen Dunn is Poet-in-Residence at Stockton State College in Pomona, New Jersey, a setting replete with God's plenty of the sylvan and a mere twenty minutes from the gaming tables of Atlantic City. In short, South Jersey seems to suit, although one would be hard pressed to imagine Dunn a moody guest wherever he happened to be sitting at life's feast. The very moods of his work—sometimes side-splitting, sometimes meditative, often a combination of the two—suggest that what he sees is only a jumping-off point. For Dunn, poetry is a continual process of clarification. And for all his quiet humor (much of which must be chalked up to a New York City upbringing) and sly self-deprecation, he is turning, before our very eyes, into a wise poet.

We talked on July 23, 1982, a morning sandwiched (significantly, I think) between a tennis tournament just over (Dunn competed in the "over-forty" class—he is forty-three—and walked off with a second place trophy) and the Artist-Teachers Institute (Dunn teaches a poetry workshop in this summer program that brings poets, dancers, painters and sculptors to Stockton) about to begin. But a third element—namely, that Dunn had

spent the better part of June at Yaddo, where he completed his fifth collection of poems—was the most important of all. As the gamblers like to put it, "Steve's on a hot roll." That's what we tried to capture in our interview.

[Pinsker]: *Would I be wrong if I thought of "Toward a Common Prayer" as a manifesto poem, or at least one that points to abiding concerns in your poetry? I'm thinking especially of lines like:*

Let the woman in this prayer
 be you, a survivor
 of her own worst thoughts, un-
 immaculate, a key to my door.
 Whatever our sorrows, let them turn
 into muscle around the heart.

[Dunn]: I hadn't thought of the poem that way. But I was at Yaddo recently and Larry Raab also picked this poem out as being "different" from the others. Maybe he was speaking about *style*. At any rate, the poem came about as a response to a scene in John Cheever's novel *Bullet Park*, in which a local guru is called in to see what he can do with an almost catatonic boy. If this poem is central in any way, it's that I wish to *acknowledge* what's difficult, what's hard about living. I don't want to bemoan it; I don't want to take the simple stance that insists "Isn't this terrible." Rather, I'm interested in finding ways of living *within* the world. In *Bullet Park*, the guru (without irony on Cheever's part) gets the catatonic boy to identify and praise what's in his room. The boy isn't cured as a result of this. He's just a little better.

"Survival," then, is an important word for you?

Yes. The trick is how to live in the world as we know it, when so much we know about it is negative. Eliot once wrote: "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" My problem has always been how to live with that knowledge. The title poem of the book I've just finished is called "**The Festivals After Dark**," and it ends with these lines: "How necessary it is to imagine / more than ever before / and in spite of everything / the festivals after dark." If my recent poems have a direction, you'll find it in these lines.

Since you've already mentioned Cheever as an "influence" or, perhaps more accurately, as a piece of reading that set a poem into motion, I wonder if you'd comment on the last lines of "As It Moves"—

Look, nothing's simple.
 It was almost dusk. I was thinking
 the seagull is a comic, filthy bird
 magnificent as it moves
 upward in imperfect air.

They strike me as a wonderful inversion of the lines that end Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning." How conscious were you of this twist?

I was aware of it, in the Harold Bloom sense, as a kind of revision—not during the act of composition, but sometime later. When I became fully aware of what I'd written, I was content to leave it because it seemed sufficiently mine.

Let's turn to a poem from one of your earlier books, A Circus of Needs. I'm really not trying to sniff out manifesto poems everywhere, but it strikes me that "The Man Who Never Loses His Balance" is about the process of writing poetry and, more particularly, about the impulse to abandon tight form and yet be closed in by the strictures of craft. At least as I read the poem, the acrobat-poet can never fall because the safety net keeps expanding to save him.

I think of it as a poem of self-criticism. It's a poem against certain tendencies in some of my earlier poems—say, *Looking for Holes in the Ceiling*—those poems that stayed within very proscribed limits, doing what I was taught to do.

You're talking about craft, I take it.

Well, if I am, it's how craft can be liberating. The important thing is that once your craft gets better, then the poem can expand and you can tackle more complicated, more emotionally risky subjects. When you begin writing, the problem is always that you'll take on subjects you're not ready for, and you're going to be sloppy. That's why a good many workshop poems are ironic. You keep the world "out there," and manage things from a safe distance. I've just finished a poem about my father that I've been working on, in one way or another, for eleven years. It's a poem that *only* could have been finished now. It was in fifty or seventy-five drafts, and in many of those drafts it *falsified* because, first, for years I wasn't technically good enough to handle that material and, second, I wasn't ready psychologically.

Do these two conditions—technical competence and psychological readiness—come about simultaneously? Does the poem call them up in the act of writing?

Only *craft* allows you to find the truth. Early on, the poem was highly rhetorical, with built-in devices that forced me to find certain things that were aesthetically pleasing but were emotional lies. When I abandoned the rhetoric of the poem and then tried to say it straight out, it required a less obtrusive rhythm and the poem got truer and truer. Over the years the poem moved, if not toward truth, then toward the absence of falsifying. I simply wasn't smart enough five or six years ago to know that if you abandon rhetoric and, instead, just speak the poems out in a more natural voice, your poems start to get truer. In that sense, an aspect of craft allowed me to find the truthfulness of what I felt about my father.

Did this discovery of a straightforward, more natural voice enable you to write more easily—and to simply write more?

I really don't know how that process works anymore. I used to work every day. But for the past two years I *feel* a poem, and sometimes I find myself in a position—like Yaddo—where I have a lot of time. On the whole, I wouldn't know what my habits have to do with how my poems turn out.

Let's take another approach. I don't see your poems getting longer, at least not in the way that other poets have taken increasingly to the book-length poem. By contrast, the average length of a Steve Dunn poem has stayed in the 30-60 line range.

The *Work and Love* book was conceived of as a long poem. It was originally called *The Monastery of Work and Love* and was in sections—maybe twenty "Monastery of Work and Love" poems. Many of them are still in the book under different titles, but I found that it was finally too narrow a way of approaching the subject. So, I abandoned the monastery notion, except in one poem. And then I was able to talk about work and love without those strictures. In the book I've just completed, I have longer poems. The father poem I talked about earlier is five pages, and most of the other poems run two pages.

How long can a lyrical voice be sustained?

There are very few long poems being written that are not in sections. Even when poets conceive of a long poem, they think of "completion" within a given period, usually about a page and a half. The poems reach that length and then you must put a number "2" or suggest some other kind of closure before going on.

Do you agree, then, with Poe's definition of 100 lines as the maximum limit for a poem, even for an epic like Paradise Lost? According to Poe, Paradise Lost was a series of 100-line poems.

I guess so. It may be the absence of the wish to tell long stories in poems, given what the novel can probably do better. Robert Pinsky's *The Explanation of America* is, I think, a long poem that holds together. On the other hand, I think my poems tell stories, although they're very *short* stories and fall, I guess, into the category of *lyric*. I would say there is a strong sense of the dramatic situation in almost every poem I write. There's always a starting point in the observable world, the world full of things that you have to pay attention to and take account of. I don't know if this comes to "story" in the traditional sense, but my "stories" are built around some kind of emotional fulcrum and try to be illustrative of a particular emotion. That's probably

as good a definition as any of the lyric. But finally they're just what I do. It doesn't matter to me what category they might be placed in.

That would be true of "Leaves," for example:

. . . This is work (bagging Autumn leaves) nobody loves.

no skill, no difficulty.
Yet when the rhythm's right
and all else is well with us

it's tolerable, almost fun,
like familiar sex.
Sometimes a dead mouse
in among the leaves,

Sometimes a frozen dog turd.
These are natural jokes,
to be counted on each year.
It's understood between us

what full means
and less than full . . .

This poem is telling a little story about raking and bagging leaves, but the focus of the poem is entirely on the nature of the relationship between the two people involved.

I won't belabor the metaphor here. I'm more interested in the spark that allows you to jump from a full account of particularities to a full account of the emotional responses to those things. The same process occurs in your poem about drowning a damaged sparrow, "With No Experience in Such Matters."

For me, poems begin in a variety of ways, but there's one common denominator: whether I'm drawing from actual or imagined experience, I have to *surprise* myself. I know I'm in a poem the first moment I *startle* myself, either linguistically or with some sort of insight. The sparrow poem, for example, is based on an actual experience. When I start from experience, the act of writing is an act of figuring out what I felt. I knew that I felt *something*, but it wasn't a clear feeling. I certainly didn't feel I had created one of the great *murders* of the century, and yet it was a little murder, and it mattered in some way. The act of writing it was an act of clarification. I had to tell the story, and this poem does it by way of a little plot about the salient situation.

I'd like to go back to some of the things you said earlier about irony. Granted, it can be a protective armor against sloppy sentimentality, but it can also generate comedy. Haven't your poems retained their comic touch?

Less so than before, I think. Most of my poems are spoken in the first person, and that person, I hope, has a sense of limitation and of what heroic or romantic

gestures mean. The poems often work against Self. My speakers have a sense of the comedy of getting through the day. In *that* sense, my work continues to be comic. But I rarely write strictly "comic" poems anymore.

Even a poem from Work and Love like "Odysseus at Rush Hour"?

Not even that poem. Certainly it has comedic elements. But the way I would have written that poem six or seven years ago is the way I wrote, say, "**At Every Gas Station There Are Mechanics**," in which I *really* wanted to be funny. I wanted laughs. Now, though I touch on things that may elicit laughter, my focus is elsewhere in the *Odysseus* poem. I'm interested in how you get *home*—and that's a wholly different purpose than trying to milk a certain situation.

Are you saying that a poem's comedic elements are something like booster rockets—things that get the poem moving and then gradually fall away?

I have less and less impulse to play the comedian, but when it happens naturally, during the course of working out a serious situation, I like it. I'm delighted of course when I can be witty and charming and pleasing, and I'm especially delighted when those qualities serve some seriousness of purpose.

*We've spent a good deal of time talking about writing poetry as a serious enterprise, and I wonder if you'd comment on "Because We Are Not Taken Seriously." On the one hand, it seems to lament, however playfully, the condition of the contemporary poet that Richard Howard points to in *Alone in America*. On the other hand, the poem mocks the condition of the "Poet of the Revolution," who is treated reverently but in the wrong way. What's the right way to be taken seriously, either for the speaker of this particular poem or for you?*

The original impulse for the poem was to talk about the problem that American writers have with complaining. It's obscene to complain about loneliness when you know about the conditions of the world. There are bad poets who, first of all, don't realize that the condition of loneliness is *everybody's* condition. If they have the sense that loneliness is peculiar to them, you don't want to read them. Second, the problem of knowing about East European poets, about Latin American poets, about others who write in totalitarian countries is this: when they talk about oppression and alienation, it has gravity because you know the historical situation. The poem has more resonance than of *one* person complaining. By contrast, when a white American poet tries to write about his own condition in the world, the problem is that you know it's personal, individual, that this poet probably has had a rather easy day, and probably a couple good weeks in a row. So, how to write a poem

that transcends the merely personal. In this case, the speaker of the poem is in a situation in which the U.S. government takes his complaints seriously—and takes action against him. Finally his loneliness *is* relevant. Then, when the Revolution comes, they, of course, want to make him the official “Poet of the Revolution.”

Is the obligation of the poet to be both the “solitary singer” and the singer for all of us? You outline the process, for example, in “Instructions for the Next Century”—the poem, I hasten to point out, that immediately follows “Because We Are Not Taken Seriously” in Work and Love.

Yes.

But what about the poets who will insist that if you think political oppression is limited to Eastern Europe or Latin America, then you aren’t paying attention? Wouldn’t they insist that you’re being too easy on America?

Well, of course, there is political oppression in the United States, but it’s of a different sort. It’s more overt in totalitarian countries and therefore calls for a different response. A black poet in America can write anything he or she wants and publish it and not get in trouble for it. There’s something fundamentally different about being a writer who can be imprisoned or killed for being subversive, which is what all true writers are. On the other hand, the problem is always how to engage the personal, that which matters to you most. I like Heidegger’s dictum that the poet must “bear witness to,” rather than to emote or complain. Witnesses try to get things right; they’re interested in precision and accuracy. The emoter is mostly interested in himself. The problem is that most political poems are written by emoters, or are merely polemical. The great writers, whatever country they’re in, will make their personal sense of things resonate into larger contexts. They will be witnesses as well as participants.

Aren’t you simply giving a formula for a good poem? After all, I could argue that the Ground Zero movement is not limited to countries more notable than ours for oppression.

If a poem makes a point of saying “Ban the Bomb!” that’s not very interesting. On the other hand, if external pressures, like the bomb, make you more aware of the things in your life that may be destroyed—your garden, your flowers, your life in all its specificities—that poem might just transcend its personal concerns and reach something larger and more important.

I’ve always been struck by the fact that your poems have dazzling end lines. Do those get special attention, as it were?

I hold out for them, that’s true. I wait for them. I revise continually, and I wait for that *click*. I suppose it’s a matter of a certain poetic taste. Some of my friends don’t want the kind of endings I like. They want a poem to trail off without my kind of closure. An unkind critic could say that my poems always want to wrap themselves up in some way.

Wouldn’t the same “unkind critic” also want to say that this preoccupation with craft is exactly the thing you were self-critical about in “The Man Who Never Loses His Balance”?

I would hope that those endings that *seem* to resolve things only resolve the tensions inherent in the poem and make no pretense at resolving the human situation. It’s possible, after all, to solve the aesthetic problems of a poem and still keep its issues open. Poems are, at best, as Frost says, momentary stays against confusion. The craft I employ is little more than the experience I’ve garnered over the years in learning how to recognize and solve problems. Every poem creates its own set of problems. Part of the fun, and the hard work, is dealing with them.

Diane Wakoski (review date 11 May 1986)

SOURCE: Wakoski, Diane. Review of *Local Time*, by Stephen Dunn. *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (11 May 1986): 1, 13.

[In the following review, Wakoski discusses Dunn’s *Local Time* in relation to his previous poetry volumes.]

In 1974, Stephen Dunn’s first collection of poems, *Looking for Holes in the Ceiling*, was published, and he attracted much positive attention as an imaginative writer of witty, tight, surprising surrealist imagist poems. His theme, from the beginning, was survival—through magic, through love, through language. He wrote in his poem “10. Travelling”:

*If you travel alone, hitch-hiking,
sleeping in woods,
make a cathedral of the moonlight
that reaches you, and lie down in it.*

*...
You are a traveler,
you know the open, hostile smiles
of those stuck in their lives.*

In this sixth collection of poems, *Local Time*, Dunn continues his theme of survival, but with almost no belief left in himself as a magician, and the result is a book which might seem disappointing to his readers who loved the richness of his earlier poems. Even William Matthews, an admirer and friend of Dunn, writes