

J. SAMUEL BOIS : IN MEMORIAM

I met Sam Bois the man on two occasions. With Sam Bois, leading writer in general semantics, I spent many, many hours -- pondering, underlining, approving, disagreeing and, most importantly, using. In 1970 I wrote a review of what I still consider his major work, The Art of Awareness (G.S.B. No. 36, pp. 78-81). I heard that he did not like it. But when I met Sam in person there was no indication of displeasure -- just an open, cheerfully challenging willingness to get to know the human being before him.

Our first extensional meeting occurred at the Joint Research Conference of the Society for General Systems Research and the Institute of General Semantics at the Phipps Conference Center, University of Denver on 8-10 May, 1970. I had not yet published my review of his book. On that occasion he generously applauded my awkwardly titled paper, "General Semantics as a General System Which Explicitly Includes the System Maker." Here I met Sam Bois the rigorous epistemologist: tough, sharp, penetrating. But I did not have (or take) much chance for close interaction with him -- my luncheon and dinner engagements were with others.

Our next meeting occurred at the Korzybski Colloquium at the School of Law, Columbia University, on October 27, 1973. I have three main image-recollections of him that I would like to share. All three, I think, serve to characterize the man and his work.

The first image recalls my luncheon partner that Saturday afternoon at the Butler Hall Penthouse Restaurant. As luck (or the planning of Charlotte Schuchardt Read) would have it, Sam and I sat next to each other at the speakers' table.

We talked briefly about my review and he agreed that, in spite of some criticisms, it was largely a laudatory piece, concluding as it did:

Those, then, are some of my semantic reactions to Dr. Bois's semantic reactions. I have felt compelled to note what I perceive as shortcomings in his book. Nevertheless, I think that teachers of general semantics (whom we would not expect to swallow any text whole) will find it a valuable base for college and graduate level courses, adult study groups, etc. And I feel grateful that the Institute has added it to the list of books available through the facilities at Lakeville.

But Bois was not long interested in discussing that review. It was done and he was done with it. What he wanted to know now was what was I thinking about now, what did I think of some things he was thinking about now -- all with a gentle impatience to get on with it: yesterday's formulations are today's strait-jacket, he seemed to feel.

For me it was a stimulating luncheon -- I think we even ate some food.

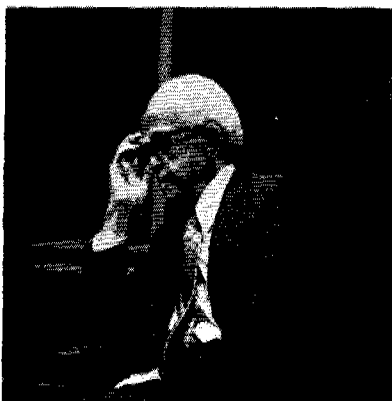
The second image shows Sam standing in the midst of a group of young people just after the luncheon. They were energetically discussing the 'next development in man' a la Lancelot Law Whyte. The most energetic, free speaker in the group was Bois. I don't now recall any specific statements he made. What I do recall is the excitement and free-wheeling vigor with which this octogenarian amusedly entertained the possibility of his own obsolescence -- And the feeling I had that his behavior self-reflexively denied his own proposition.

The third image is of a tired Sam Bois at the end of a long day sitting next to me in a relatively non-careening New York taxi, talking in that still French-Canadian accent about his next day's trip to Montreal to present a seminar in general semantics-epistemics. Epistemics -- his word for what he perceived as his extensions of Korzybski's system: so characteristic of this man who, having once been caught in a system (Catholic Aristotelian-Thomism) wasn't about to become ensnared in another.

As I bid him "Good night" at the entrance to his hotel, (he refused to be 'helped' to his room) and watched him go into the building (the first stage of tomorrow's journey to assist others in learning the "art of awareness") I was struck by the energy and life-trajectory of this man who, having achieved a measure of freedom for himself was determined, at great personal cost, to offer it to others.

With his death on January 2, 1978 we have lost a major formulator among general semanticists and among human beings in general. Korzybski defined humans as time-binders. But some humans seem to be champion time-binders. Sam Bois was such a champion.

Robert P. Pula



J. SAMUEL BOIS 1892 - 1978

MAJOR WORKS

Explorations in Awareness, 1957

The Art of Awareness, 1966, 1973, 1978

Communication As Creative Experience, 1968

Breeds of Men, 1970

Epistemics: The Science-Art of Innovating, 1973

Photo by Stefan Congrat-Butlar