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THEY TURN TO THEIR ICONS FOR REVENGE

Philip Salom. *The Silent Piano*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1980. \$4.00. 104pp.

The most recent book of poetry from the Fremantle Arts Centre Press, *The Silent Piano*, by Philip Salom, is an exercise in linguistics as much as it is an unburdening of ideas, with as much emphasis being placed on language as an ultimate end, as on drawing out its intrinsic worth as a medium of communication.

The objective of the Fremantle Arts Centre Press is the publication of regional (Western Australian) writers. *The Silent Piano* is number 11 in a paperback series of poetry and short stories. The Press, by concentrating on regional writers, runs the risk of isolating itself from the rest of Australian literature; however, the series to date has been successful I believe, both in terms of recoupment of costs (although they are heavily subsidised), and in terms of prestige.

For those who judge a book on its presentation and style, this book will delight. The cover is very striking with the simple outline of a man's upper torso shadowed on a vivid-red gloss background. The interior of the book is attractive, with some interesting woodcuts by the author.

For those who judge a book on the written word, this book will perplex and stimulate, for Salom's style, while achieving a complex integration of rhetorical and evocative genres, is strangely terse in an almost disconcerting manner. Sentences are often short and seem to have little symmetry about the, as though some objective part is missing:

Mind was pulled from sadness,
earth like that old excited knapsack. ("Figures in Clay")

Yet his passion at cutting away superfluous words heightens the tension within the poetry. A type of urgency suggests action and a hidden menace:

As if going into battle, the knapsack
full on my shoulders, its pipe and nozzle
slung up like a rifle. ("Bushfire")

Salom possesses a reasonably high level of poetic skill, for he crafts his poems tightly, with an unpretentious use of words and images. Often the images are simple and uncompromising, with a greater emphasis placed on elevating language to a heightened plane, than on elevating thought or the process of communicating personal insights. These images reflect people and things around him, often in rural environments. The style mostly is rhetorical, and his cast of characters tells a chronicle of events taken from real life – cattle sales, drought, fishing, bushfires and so on. There is little evidence of any attempt at interpretative poetry early in the book; however, in the latter section, Salom deals with various topics all with the theme of social aberration, in a style vastly different from the earlier poems.

In this section, entitled "The Silent Piano," the real essence of Salom's poetry emerges, "the word goes wrong, like the mind" ("The Scriptures").

Salom is absorbed with the odd, the sad aspects of life – wars, solitude, death, and human degradation. In this section, Salom defoliates the tree of its graceful and rustic leaves, and lays bare the strong tap-root of his sub-conscious attitudes. There are some very compelling passages here:

Listen. In their darkened buildings
not from understanding, but
in weariness, in despair of pale moments
they turn to their icons for revenge. ("The Dancer")

In this poem, Salom deals with the fairly hackneyed topic of love and its destructive effects – the power the beautiful have to enslave the less attractive (in this context, woman's sexual hold over man), yet he deals with it skillfully:

Men climb the fretted light
and knock, then lunge at love,
hopeless, dying animals. ("The Dancer")

Salom exhibits a subtle bitterness in this poem, a bitterness at such an unsavoury aspect of what he considers the vision of love is an ideal. There is a subtle hint of self-confessed

weakness in sexual relationships, and this passage leaves us with the haunting yet honest confession of the affected:

Love falls away from images,
yet the images remain. (‘‘The Dancer’’)

Salom appears to be grasping for direction in his work. He is tentatively reaching out for the more difficult, yet more appealing medium of expressionism, while clinging still to the safer, more conventional rhetorical genre which is apparent in earlier poems. There is a definite struggle in Salom’s work between the concept of reality of truth and the concept of perception of truth. In his rhetorical poems we see a conscious attempt to capture circumstances and memories as they are remembered, or as they happened. This type of personal account is often uninteresting. However, there is in the latter part of the book work which suggests that Salom is reaching towards the more intrinsic medium of expression through the application of more subjective images, which have as their core, not the surface trivia of narration, but the more evocative philosophical idiom which focuses on the concepts of moral and ethical behaviour:

But, lawmen, I word your pact,
like the devil, for nothing tempts the sword
like righteousness. (‘‘The Scriptures’’)

I feel the latter passages, with the exception of several poems, notably ‘‘Leonardo’’ and ‘‘Easter Island,’’ show that Salom is capable of handling more difficult techniques.

Overall, the book is interesting, but perhaps too long. The author fails to sustain the high standard often reached. This disappoints. However, this disappointment is easily overcome by the many strong passages. Perhaps more stringent editing would have scaled down the body of work. This would have strengthened overall the impact of this, Salom’s first book, by leaving only the passages which exhibited strength and an individual character.