Poetry Australia (Ed. Dr Grace Perry) paid Barry O'Donohue the tribute of devoting its entire issue for September 1983 to the publication of thirty-one of his poems. The title of the collection is as shown above. In the same year the young Brisbane writer scored again by winning (in conjunction with Jan Turner-Jones) the Warana Festival Poetry Prize.

Editor of Image, a poetry magazine emanating from Brisbane, O'Donohue is one of a group of young poets keenly interested in one another's output — which, in O'Donohue's case, is considerable in terms of quantity. As far as quality is concerned, and particularly in the collection under review, one discerns a great deal of unevenness.

View from a First Floor Window is not a first publication, but it does represent early days in the writer's career; so that if it seems to be more indicative of what he might do than what he has done, this is no more than one would expect. There is a certain degree of promise which, with searching self-analysis and ruthless self-editing, he ought to be able to fulfil. He has many things going for him and these things are worth having.

First of all, he displays an obvious joy in writing and projects on to his work a healthy exuberance and verve, even when dealing with the doom-gloom type of subject so dear to contemporary writers. He is prepared to tackle a wide variety of themes and forms. He has felicity with words and images, particularly when he is not being self-conscious. At times he evidences pleasing insight and empathy.

One of the best poems in the book is Small town. Quite unassuming in theme and deceptively simple in treatment, this is a well-crafted piece of work in which one can admire the faithful and compassionate portrait of the small town mother, at the same time taking pleasure in the poet's control of build-up and form that lead to a feeling of rightness and unity. The poem's justification is that it had something to say and said that well.
Visiting an Art Gallery and City Mall are two descriptive poems that succeed and Country Woman, carrying a little more feeling content, is another. Especially good is the small, deft Shadow, which uses one image only and makes its point with an economy of words that adds, not subtracts, impact. By contrast another short poem, Simplicity, is disappointing. This is chiefly because of the use of fussy and fanciful metaphors in the first four verses. The final three lines with their simple, telling concept come too late to redeem the poem.

Strained and over-elaborate metaphors spoil a number of these poems. Summer, with its butterflies that 'cough yellow clouds' of pollen and its days that 'ride in thirsting for blood' is a casualty of this metaphorical malaise. But in addition of course this poem suffers from an ugly concept ('flies that swarm in your mouth') that verges on anti-poetry. The sudden introduction, too, of the second person pronoun – you – is confusing, if not downright annoying.

O'Donohue is not the only modern poet to use this pronoun pre-emptively and far too freely. It is a fairly common practice. Perhaps intended to increase communication between poet and reader – to bring the reader in – it often has exactly the opposite effect and only accentuates their separateness. It is true, too, that the poet alienates and even provokes the reader when he attempts to lay down what you are thinking or you are feeling. If brow-beaten enough in this way (see for example the first section of the Transgression series) the reader may well have defiant recourse to rude and rebellious riposte.

The unevenness of quality that is present in many of the shorter poems – for example Simplicity – is naturally even more noticeable in longer works such as Newcastle, Dust and Poems of transgression against the inevitable. Within the longer poems there are many sections that come off very well. Some could have stood as smaller poems in their own right. One such is Section 5, the last section in the Transgression series, and there are numerous smaller parts in other poems that stand out like lights against darkness and show how well O'Donohue can write.

The longer poems suffer, too, from a surplus of complicated imagery and afford dangerous opportunities for the poet to fall into tendencies that disfigure much modern poetry. These are tendencies to pontificate, to strike attitudes and to
offer abstruse snippets of wisdom. One such occurs in the very first poem in the book – *Childhood*. This lyrical and rather touching poem is proceeding very well until, in the sixth and seventh lines, the reader is gratuitously treated to a pearl of wisdom:

We change without ever changing,
without understanding the transformation.

All this heavy “pronouncement from on high” does is distract the reader’s attention from the real feeling of the work and spoil the flow of the verse.

Another annoying practice indulged in by many modern poets, not excluding O’Donohue, is the insertion of meaningless rhetorical questions.

Why does self-appraisal
make us aware of the presence
of others?

O’Donohue suddenly enquires in *Dream sequence*. It is unwise suddenly to accost readers with posers like this. It is not only that they fracture concentration but that they seem to require answers; and as readers, particularly readers of modern poetry, need only half an excuse to go off on some thought-track of their own, they may well choose to do so by thinking up some irreverent, not to say loutish, answers.

This is not to deplore the use of questions totally. When used appropriately, and as a vital part of the whole structure, they serve admirably. See for instance *Small town*, where questions add to the dimensions of the poem by giving access to the mother’s thoughts – they are there of their own right.

There are enough gleams of gold in this collection of poems for one to put up with the residual dross. Intelligent self-criticism and much hard work are needed to consolidate the writer’s good start. Failing stern external editing, O’Donohue must be his own editor. He has proved in poems such as *Shadow* and *Small town* that he well knows what poetry is all about – now he must throw away unhelpful practices and allow into his poetry nothing that is not integral to the perfect whole.

*The Projectionist* is a second publication, but as in the case of Barry O'Donohue these are still early days in Philip Salom's career. Many of the blemishes mentioned in the preceding review are present in this collection of fifty poems: the compulsion to preach or to indulge in heavy rhetoric, the piling up of far-fetched or mismatched metaphors, obscurity for its own sake, and general unevenness of quality. Additionally, Salom seems to have a penchant for the definite article 'the' and the lazy neuter pronoun 'it'.

In all other ways, however, the two books are completely different. *The Projectionist* is to *View from a first floor window* as night is to day. Salom's work is very introspective and he seems to embrace a deeply pessimistic existentialism, which he expounds graphically and with few touches of humour. The reader is taken forcibly along on a sort of tour of Salom's Inferno - to a world populated by Grand Guignol freaks.

The poet accompanies this tour with menacing, staccato rhythms of verse, often achieved by noun/verb line endings. He pounds out successions of statements with uncompromising didacticism and at times even issues imperatives:

- Recognise this building I have suffered in. By day
  stare from the window.

  or

- Declare yourself
  fatalist or fool.'

or (this time to the deity)

- God, you know how we hate silence
  Announce this man a saint.

This device, seemingly so very macho, is in reality quite weak because the poet knows, and the reader knows that he knows, that no one is going to do the slightest thing about his orders.

Salom experiments boldly with words and their usages, twisting and warping them to his will. In *Him, Night-work, Tenant's Tradesman* among other poems he tries out a kind of poet's shorthand, as well as scrambling verb conjugations freely.
While it is quite understandable that a young poet would want to experiment, he needs to realise that if his work becomes too complicated, readers will simply refuse to take the trouble to unscramble it.

Salom's themes are, by and large, fairly grim, or, if they are not grim in themselves, they become so under the searing white light that he projects upon them as unspARINGLY as he spotlights the acne pits on the younger Benchley's neck. The Railway Line and the innocent-sounding Summer Celebrations (not to mention Dream) are some of his nominally harmless poems that may not leave the reader quite as they found him. One of course expects the worst from a poem called The Killing and soon learns that the semi-biographical Benchley poems carry disturbing undertones.

It is the Benchley poems which very wisely are not grouped but scattered throughout the book, that give the collection unity, serving too as an appropriate backdrop against which Salom acts out his 'grievances, anxieties' (Know, p. 71). In the Benchley poems, too, one finds glimpses of Salom's somewhat Swiftian humour. They are certainly among the best in the book and, probably because they have a definite focus, display the highest degree of coherence. And if at times these poems seem more like brutally and unflatteringly angled camera shots than pretty pictures, this only adds to the particular character of this forceful poetry.

Because it is forceful. There is no doubt that Philip Salom has the power to attract and compel the reader's attention. As the Projectionist he is always showing pictures — that the pictures he shows are not always pleasant is probably because, in his view, the world is not pleasant. Of course it could be the case that it is the unpleasant side of the world, or of himself, that he at present chooses to look at.

In this collection there is a series of 'cliff-edge' or coastal poems. In general, they are much more accessible and less demanding to the reader than unlocated, abstract poems like Dream, Position or It was. Pleasing examples of these coastal poems are Osprey, Cliff Cemetery, The Fish and The Coast. Moonlight is one of the poet's few attempts at lyricism, spoiled by the self-conscious use of the word 'clichéd', just one jarring word in rather a beautiful little poem.
There is no doubt that Philip Salom has unusual poetic talent. Sections of most poems (for example, the first verse in *Sea Wall*) are very good but as in the same poem they often deteriorate into morbid self-analysis. As with O'Donohue, it will be interesting to watch his further development.