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[Review of the book The blood of our silence by Kelwyn Sole (sic)]

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dip into by themselves, picking and choosing chapters of interest and deciding which types of exercises they wish to attend to. Learners can proceed at their own pace and find material for their own particular learning styles. Useful English is learner centred, stimulating and challenging and thus pleasing for the classroom.

However, I found this textbook curiously neutral if one considers that it is a textbook intended for South African pupils. There is a fair smattering of South African writers, for example, Dan Jacobson, Alan Paton, Richard Rive, Jennifer Davids, Ellen Khuzwayo etc. It is difficult to discern the criteria for picking these particular writers rather than others. There is little overt political writing or protest writing. Extracts have been taken from a few South African newspapers and magazines such as Frontline and The Argus; many more extracts come from British based sources or handle topics that pertain to Britain and America and are really quite "safe". Many other South African newspapers and magazines aimed not only at white readers are available; no attention has been given to these resources. The exercises do not attempt to make pupils examine the texts in a critically linguistic way, making them aware of ideology and how it is transmitted in even the most apparently neutral texts.

I found chapters with very promising titles such as, "The art of politics", "The woman's place", "That's fair enough: justice, law and government" and "Prejudice" to be bland and deceptive. Topics dealt with here are often not South African at all and no real attempt is made to confront the tough issues which Std 9's and 10's will be faced with in the South Africa in which they will be living. It is very important to provide the pupils with some way of understanding how language is being used in particular ways, often to obscure and hide issues concerning racism, sexism and heterosexism. No attention is paid to these very important needs of young adults in this text book.

The strengths of this textbook lie in its variety both of material and exercises and in its learner centredness. Its great weakness lies in its attempt to present language in South Africa as a fairly neutral activity. Useful English could be a resource for a good teacher if it is used in combination with other material from sources to which learners should be exposed and if there is constant attention given to how language works.

Deborah Mehl

The Blood of Our Silence, by Kelwyn Sole Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987.

Poetry and history, the Mexican poet Octavio Paz observes, are rooted in different conceptions of time. Whereas history concerns itself with succession and synthesis (the weaving of individual strands into communal and national cloth), poetry - like a fiesta - celebrates the "break in the sequence of time", a liberation of momentary passion from its cell within the organic narrative of history. In recent times, South African historians have adopted the language of poetry; through workshops and field research, they are tracing historical patterns with the fine nibs of personal anecdote, the humble individual's impression. By these means, they are able to transform abstraction into story; the

collective spirit into the flesh of personal lives. Meanwhile, South African poetry is being exposed, as never before, to the generalizing pressures of history. Ideologues and activists demand that it abandon its realm of autonomous experience in which, the poet believes, a transitory feeling discovers its perpetual recurrence; forgo its focus on the incident, and take up the political programmes of the epoch.

The dialectic between history and poetry invariably results, during periods of ideological conflict, in abrasive quarrels between writers and critics and even within the work of each writer. Although, as Paz suggests, poetry and history are "condemned to conjunction", their marriage is neither tranquil nor lasting; no sooner do they appear to be speaking with one voice than they are "immediately transformed into discord". The most challenging poetry emerging in South Africa today is poetry which accepts no divorce of convenience; poetry that explores - without sliding into premature partisanship - the struggles of this factious household.

And this is why Kelwyn Sole's first collection, The Blood of Our Silence, is an important one. Wherever the writer's consistent and cogent critical pronouncements might have led him, Sole the poet is willing to take equal issue with advocates of both points of view - by challenging the sincerity of platform rhetoric and the social relevance of contemplation alike. He must speak from both perspectives, because each makes such compelling claims on his verse.

Sole is well aware of the dangers, compromises and absurdities waiting to beset anyone who plunges into either extreme. Embedded in his caution, perhaps, is an envy for those who have, explicitly and peremptorily, opted for one side or the other, but he tenaciously resists the easy slide into bias. Sometimes he stares through the introspective vacuum produced when studied technique is unaccompanied by social content:

> *We hook our own mouths,*
> *incessantly. Rhyme and scan*
> *but find no deeper essence...*

(The lines come from 'Poems About Fish'. The irony: not only is it, technically a most accomplished poem; it evokes complex and expansive feelings.)

More often, he is impatient with opportunistic "poets of the people" who, while enhancing their precarious reputations and lining their pockets, debase the political struggles they claim to represent by packaging them in cliches and hollow slogans. Some of his sharpest barbs are aimed at such a

> *craftsman with nothing to say,*
> *parasite on the flank of revolt.*

Vacuity from whatever source is tedious. But how is one to recognize value? Elsewhere Sole proposes the problematic equation of relevance with the size of one's audience, and posits that unpoetic abstraction called the mass as the ideal one.

> *...without the ears of my people*
> *all my people*

my mouth is an absence in the air,
a hole chiming nonsense.

Because of the severity of his expectations, doubt is more dominant in his work than assurance, and dogged allegiance to causes (political and literary) sometimes overwhelms the natural subtlety of his language. He speaks, in the main, of a bleak, abused, and ruthless world which induces scepticism better than hope; yet the force of desire is never suppressed for long, for

a voice still comes to me,
whispering a world
of riotous, mingling colours
I can no longer imagine,

and this voice verifies every person's right to sexual fulfilment, political justice, and communal identity. Energy throbs beneath the surface of despair: in the "blood of our silence".

The book is arranged in five sections. The first three ('The Village', 'The Colony'. 'Motherland') offer a record of the poet's experience over the last decade. The journey begins in a Botswana village. Here the poet feels alienated - from the community, from history, and from self. In a society whose main pastimes are adultery and growing pumpkins, his chief hope, at this stage, is to find himself in a tepid, ethically neutral utopia. Ridding himself progressively of such illusions, he moves on, eventually to the more abrasive, critical ambience of the urban intellectual, the activist in academe. It is a rite of passage, which equips the poet with irony, sharpened senses and (often embattled) conviction.

There are many fine poems in these sections: excellent descriptions of place ('Ovamboland', a travelogue through territory writhing under economic and military suffocation; 'Troyeville/Bertrams', home turf at some stage); sensitively rendered individual portraits ('Old Man with Pencil'); courageous ideological critique ('Hewat', in which he castigates the aversion to visionary insight of radical cliques); and trenchant satire ('Jazz, a send-up of Nazi musical neuroses; 'Praxis', which sardonically contrasts the uses and abuses of slogans like "Power to the People!").

The most impressive, and coherent, section is undoubtedly the last, 'Manifestoes'. Here some of the spectres that have, thus far, haunted the collection are looked at straight in the face. Here Sole's imagination is most vigorous. The poems point us to the three main features of his landscape: the "Alpine sentences of power" that his academic training hoists grandiloquently over the cut-and-thrust of daily struggle; the "word-processed fists" which - by punching the air with facile anger and hollow certainties - serve only to marginalize poetry by dissipating its potential for imaginative transformation; and the sea, in which once, child-like, he was able to "tumble and dive", to discover simple truths, beauty, and fantastic images - the sea whose "tides of doubt" now "suck our curdled intellects", and show up reefs to separate the poetic image from the realities of the street.

The tussle between these never exclusive ways of seeing and speaking creates both the strengths and limitations in Sole's poetry. They are strengths when conflicting perspectives strike like flintstones against one another, when conventional boundaries between criticism, contemplation and rhetoric are cut away on the twin edge of his irony and image-making. Poems like 'The Discourse of History', 'Dangling Poem', 'Poems about Fish' and 'The Blood of Our Silence' are memorable.

They impose limitations, however, when boundaries compel Sole to constrict his vision, to restrain his natural subtlety and cunning. In 'Honeymoon', for instance, we are exposed to a moral conflict we all, surely, have experienced: the equivocal enjoyment of his passion in the presence of someone to whom it is denied. As far as that goes, the poem broaches a sensitive issue. But we expect more from it than merely being informed that a honeymoon ought really to be a seminar on working class oppression. In 'Conjunction', Sole tries his hand at the erotic. For all the candour of his commentary on sexual gymnastics, the voice cannot shake off its lugubrious tone, and fails to give us what his 'Whales' gives: a

> *grace*
> *that glides*
> *beneath all surface forms.*

It's in the love poems that the problem is most marked. Sincere, perceptive poems about intimacy are, if anything, harder to get right than the most incisive and ironic statement of political issues. One is hopeful, though - from the evidence of this collection - that Sole is still to write love poetry that will truly express his belief that

> *Love is a harbour? Rather*
> *a wild and deadly sea.*

In these poems, we do not yet stand on the shores of oceanic turmoil; instead, we witness love and sex as somewhat compromising acts of *politicus interruptus*.

It must be said that this book - for all its accomplishments - is too long, and of uneven quality. Some pieces remain promising fragments; some political allusions are brought in too self-consciously; sometimes a precise reporter's style only confirms what we know - without enlarging or re-interpreting it. The blame should be laid on his editor, rather than on Sole. This teeming herd ought to have been culled, so that the best specimens might stand out as they should.

At his best, Sole is a rewarding and provocative poet. In both person and craft, he is impatient with whatever kind of "cow-stupid" hanger-on hinders the progress of poetry. When he pronounces on such issues, there is persuasion in his voice. He speaks for a good many people in this tongue-mangling country. He has yet to resolve his personal struggle with the conflicting demands of poetry and history; but he does remind us - with a clarity and urgency few poets have matched in recent years - that that struggle is at the heart of our imaginative labours.

Francis Faller