
**Introductory Review in the *Eastern Star*, 12 February 2015, by Dan Wylie, of
Brian Walter, *Otherwise and Other Poems*, Echoing Green Press (2014)**

There are any number of aspects of Brian's poetry that might attract praise, and I'll just mention some that interest me. What has struck me about many of Brian's poems over the years is a kind of knottiness, a certain shaggy honesty; you can feel almost physically the thoughts wrestling out of the stone, like Michelangelo's sculptures. In several poems here, however, I see a higher degree of conventional polish and paradoxically, ease of expression – and I do not mean to be derogatory in using the word 'conventional'. I am thinking here particularly of the volume's final poem, 'Nontlokoma', which consists, in mini-epic style, of eight-line stanzas of great regularity of rhythm and rhyme, but with a conversational ease of expression that belies the effort that must have gone into it. In its application of the ancient Greek legend of Echo and Narcissus to the Eastern Cape, Brian draws all at once on Ovid, on Spenser, on Thomas Pringle writing similar stanzas about the same locality. This is a difficult thing to pull off without artificiality or preciousness, and Brian does it a whole lot better than Pringle ever could; partly I think because he is so steeped in the variety of national and local cultures that he can elucidate all sorts of parallels and meeting-points between them in a variety of languages. This is more common amongst our black writers, whose history has demanded that they work in two or more languages, whereas too many English-speakers remain trapped in their monolingualism. Brian is a leader here. So Tiresias becomes 'the old *gqirha*, the he-she shaman'; and it takes some balls to rhyme 'What's in it for me?' with '*ngantsomi*'.

So Brian also manages to combine evidence of intensive reading in many cultures and eras with an earthy sense of connection with the physical world; his knowledge of bird- and sea-life is no less intimate than his ability to allude to Spenser or the Bible. I am, being who I am, especially interested in the ecological sensitivities in many poems ('Of Shale-Beds and Shamans, Or, the hydrofracking blues' is a key poem here) – but the valorisation of the natural world is not exploited in sentimental or voyeuristic separation from human presences, whether damaging or protective, but as inevitably conjoined with the human. So Brian can write equally compassionately about an impoverished gardener as about threatened Knysna louries. This kind of integrated vision is, so to speak, integral to Brian's gimlet-eyed humanity. Add to all this the geographical range of these poem's locales, from Bradford on Avon to northern Nigeria to Brian's home in Port Elizabeth, and you have here a collection of terrific range, yet a consistent voice: wry, hard-earned, and compassionate.