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Review

Dan Wylie, *Road Work*. Empangeni, Echoing Green 2007, viii + 82 pp., Paperback, ISBN 978-0-9802501-3-8.

Dan Wylie's new collection is real *work*, in many of the word's senses. As is typical of a good volume, meditation on the title, and its various challenging meanings, can help determine a way into some of the poems in the collection. Putting aside evocative hints such as the "road work" of physical training, the fairly obvious work written "on the road," or the sense – which comes out very strongly in this multi-continental meditation – of travel pieces, there are hints that the road refers not only to journeying, but to the very physicality of the earth upon which we travel, or over which we travel.

In the opening poem's take-off "leaving the ground – but never, / never the grounds of doubt," the earth is an uncertain place; while the "Touchdown" of the title evokes the physical: the bodily love of "your quizzical / pressures, your attentive scents," (1-6) "your fingertips against my cheek" (3-4).

The grounds of doubt upon which the poet travels are again evoked in "On the Alsek Trail": "When I tramp on hidden ice it sounds / as if beliefs inside my head are cracking" (15).

Here, the poet is "a clot of tropical blood in a white unstable wind," who is "muddling out the trail," where "clot" speaks of health-danger, perhaps. Or foolishness? This uncertainty, this tension, is a way into Wylie's labyrinthine set of roads: he is "In the Labyrinth" in one of the later poems of the collection (58).

Perhaps, then, the title of this collection calls us to the tension between the physical world of being and experience, the "road" upon which we travel, and the "work," the poem, the artifact, the mind-at-work, which reflects. In "Bestiary," Wylie confronts his work as an artist, his "life's task," with its imperative verbs: "Sacralize," "Resurrect," "Become," "Be." He is to be "this Book's" (primarily, the Book of Kells evoked in the poem, reflectively the current volume) quartet of scribes: the meticulous, the

drudge, the innovator, the sly anarchist. He evokes the various roles of the poet who works to create possibility in the uncertain world: "don't stop kindling fires / in the darkening pestle of space" (13-14).

For, despite the hard, confusing realities of the road, Wylie nevertheless finds the possibilities offered by as worldly a substance, as metaphorical a medium, as wood, in "Wood-Turning": "love, hate, the abrading days, / the contingency of knots, / the plain universals of grain" from which he fashions into "what?" Perhaps, "a slight chalice . . . finished in this unfinishable world" (18).

In his "making" of the world in these poems, Wylie seems to move between the earthly, which may sometimes be comforting, as in "Hands" (43-44): "I turn again to the land, / to the unbridgeable comfort of hills, / to the thought of grounded friends / with their calm voices and their ordinary books," their "homely lathes,") and the airborne cerebral, where the language and imagery become tough: real road work for the reader. In one airborne meditation, in the evocatively titled "Home Work" (25-26), he alludes to the metaphysical poet, Donne: "If my quickening heart keeps halving the interval / between beats, how can I ever die?"

Often in the more cerebral language and imagery, Wylie is difficult, though not unrewarding: "Bestiary," to return to that poem on the Book of Kells, is entangled in its "Thwarted artistry": "grind elixirs of malachite, azurite, gold. / Sacralize mere oxide," and "Resurrect in the matrix of mauling jaws / the flaccid calligraphies of earth" (13-14). A danger, however, is that such tough language might get in the way of the reader visualizing the imagery, of doing her or his own work.

It is thus almost with relief that we turn to the poems of a confusion more simply expressed, of earth-bound questing, like the closing piece, "Erratic Boulder," that evokes "Mister Darwin": "What is that, still traveling / in the granite centre of your stillness?" "What is this life / that is cracking me open / from belly to crown?" (82).

The world is not finished, the poet is still questing. *Road Work* invites the reader on an interesting, challenging journey, where the poet is engaged on a life's work, not without difficulty: "I look up, scabble for a hold on the tangible sky" (15).

What does this collection say about being South African, about being African? How does it speak to us here, now? My first readings of these poems suggested that the collection might be too cosmopolitan, too personal; too disengaged, somehow, to shed light on our being in Africa (assuming it sets out to be, but this is a question constantly raised in our context).

However, this was a superficial response: the collection, as good collections should, opens the way to reflection. The journey through the collection constantly returns the reader to that link between South Africa and the poet's home country of Zimbabwe, the collection's omphalos on the Great North Road.

In the various poems entitled "Tropic of Capricorn," the decaying monument (art itself? our ideals? a vanishing sense of certainty?) might suggest the essential capriciousness of our own road. There is a central unease in Africa, and its promises of the renaissance of human dignity.

In Wylie's poems the personal travel pieces bring home the broader comment, as in "Driving to Jo'burg" (40-41): "Now the Free State strips its past / like a scalp. The sky over Sasolburg rots."

Wylie's earlier "road collection," as it is called on the cover of the present work, was *The Road Out* (1996). Joyously, the poet ended that work with "raising my hand in answer, / I conduct the sky." There is a greater, though richer, uncertainty in the present work, which captures the unease felt at the tropic: the "apprehensions of thorns," in the third poem of the "Tropic of Capricorn" quartet (48).

Closer to the poet's home, the poem that alludes to the title of the collection, "Roadworks" (51) is very much on local Eastern Cape ground (though also metaphorically the domain of Charon). Which provides the context/s for the impersonal authority described in "In Line" (47): "The teller's yellowed eyes lock onto mine. / He nods. I am next."

This collection offers the reader challenging and rewarding reading work.

WORKS CITED

Wylie, Dan. 1996. *The Road Out*. Plumstead: Snailpress.

Brian Walter