

## Reviews ...

Newspaper for Wordfest  
National Arts Festival  
Grahamstown

# Wylie's poems hit Wordfest

Review of *Road Work*, by Dan Wylie  
Reviewed by Dr Brian Walter

**D**an Wylie's new collection, *Road Work* is, as implied by the title, real work, in many of that 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 found within.

Putting aside evocative hints such as the 'road work' of physical training, the fairly obvious 'work done on the road', the sense of travel pieces, which come out very strongly in this multicontinental meditation, there is a sense in which the road refers not only to journeying, but to the very physicality of the earth upon which we travel, or over which we travel.

Perhaps the title can call 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.

This tension is, at least, one way into Wylie's labyrinthine world (he is 'In the Labyrinth' in one of the later poems of the collection). The opening poem, for instance, is telling in this regard. 'Touchdown',

with its space-travel language, brings us back to earth: 'The tyres smoke on irrevocable tar; apprehension growls in reverse / thrust. / But your arms are open; I tentatively weigh / your fingertips against my cheek.' With the joyous 'hello' of possibility that concludes the poem, the apprehension of the touchdown may be a 'cheek' in this world of possibility.

For, despite the hard, ominous realities of, say, the bank queue in Mutare ('In Line': 'The teller's yellowed eyes lock onto mine. / He nods. I am next.'), Wylie finds the possibilities offered by as worldly a substance, a 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'.

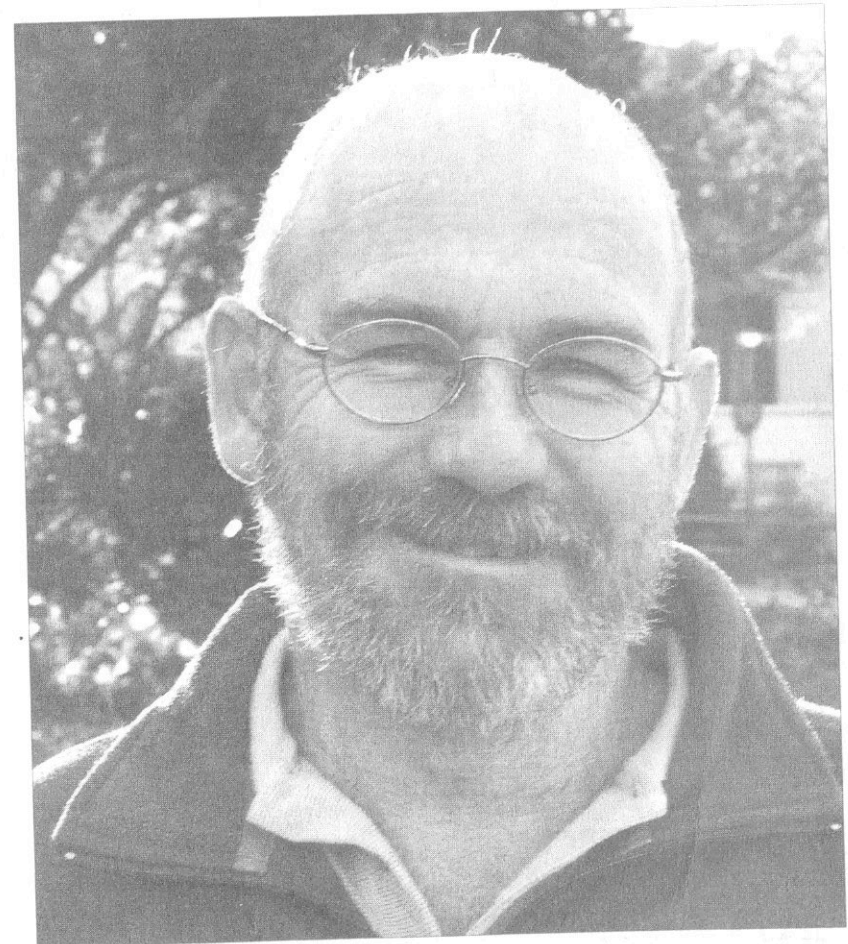
In his 'making' of the world in these poems, Wylie seems to move between the earthly, sometimes comforting ('I turn again to the land, / to the unbridgeable comfort of hills, / to the thought of grounded friends / with their calm voices and their ordinary books', their 'homely lathes'), and the airborne cerebral, where the language and imagery become

tough: real road work for the reader. In one airborne meditation, he echoes the metaphysical poet, Donne: "If my quickening heart keeps halving the interval / between beats, how can I ever die?" (this in the evocatively titled 'Home Work').

In the more cerebral language and imagery, Wylie is difficult, though not unrewarding: 'Bestiary', which reflects on the Book of Kells, is entangled in its 'Thwarted artistry': must / grind elixirs of malachite, azurite, gold. / Sacralize mere oxide; and 'Resurrect in the matrix of mauling jaws / the flaccid calligraphies of earth'.

It is almost with relief that we turn to the poems of simple confusion, of earth-bound questing, like the closing piece 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?'

The world is not finished, the poet is still questing. *Road Work* invites you on an interesting, challenging journey.



Local poet Dan Wylie basks in the glow of having completed another sterling book of poetry.  
Pic: Steve Kretzmann