Don’t say ‘etc.’
Lost and found in the work of Ivan Vladislavić.

Abstract

This piece attempts an essayistic, exploratory and (I hope) creative engagement with the work of Ivan Vladislavić, paying close attention to The Loss Library (2011) while also revisiting the early stories republished in 2010 as Flashback Hotel. Drawing on a recent collection of critical responses to his writing, Marginal Spaces (ed. Gaylard, 2011), my approach also touches on lesser known, occasional pieces in seeking to trace how Vladislavić’s investment in an experimental, anti-realist poetics (the French ‘workshop for potential literature’ OuLiPo, for example) underlies the documentary texture of even his ostensibly non-fictional texts. Paying attention to the idiosyncratic and complex imaginative architectures that generate his prose, my reading explores how these avowedly writerly works remain open to a contemporary African metropolis, even while enamoured of anachronisms, second-hand bookshops and outdated libraries. Reflecting on my experience of teaching Portrait with Keys (2006) to undergraduates in South Africa, I hope to explore how Vladislavić’s works manage to be both stringent and accommodating: dictionary-obsessed and abstrusely postmodern but also (in my experience) uniquely inclusive and ‘open’. I suggest that the supple and unpredictable response of the prose to a commerce-saturated society creates an address that is critical without being censorious. Taken as a whole, Vladislavić’s oeuvre offers a deep thinking-through of what it means to ‘provincialise’ English, and to abandon prescriptive grammars for descriptive ones. The result is a distinctive oscillation between the constrained and the serendipitous, the lost and the found.

Biographical note

Hedley Twidle grew up in Namaqualand and outside Johannesburg, studied at Oxford, Edinburgh and York, and is now a lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Cape Town. His research interests include: South African literature, history and performance culture; environmentalism, literature and ecocriticism in a postcolonial context; the relation between the colonial archive and the contemporary writer. For the last few years he has also worked as a researcher and copy-editor on (as well as contributor to) a forthcoming Cambridge History of South African Literature (2012), edited by David Attwell and Derek Attridge.

Details of his publications can be found at the following web addresses:
http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/english/people/h-twiddle.html
www.seapointcontact.wordpress.com

Declaration

This article is an original contribution. It has not been published elsewhere previously. The submission of the article constitutes a licence to publish in the journal and online.
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In a piece titled ‘Practical exercises’, Georges Perec gives some instructions on how to set down a city street in words:

Note down what you can see. Anything worthy of note going on? Do you know how to see what’s worthy of note? Is there anything that strikes you? Nothing strikes you. You don’t know how to see. (50)

As part of the compendium of faux-serious writing experiments that make up his 1974 enquiry into different ‘species of spaces’, he goes on to consider the apparently simple act of making a list:

The cafes. How many cafes are there? One, two, three, four. Why did you choose this one? Because you know it, because it’s in the sun, because it sells cigarettes. The other shops: antique shops, clothes, hi-fi, etc. Don’t say, don’t write ‘etc.’. Make an effort to exhaust the subject, even if that seems grotesque, or pointless, or stupid. You still haven’t looked at anything, you’ve merely picked out what you’ve long ago picked out. (50)

This embargo on the etcetera is something that comes to mind whenever I read the work of Ivan Vladislavić. A refusal to shirk or abbreviate the everyday, to take anything as read; a punctilious, editorialising attention to the smallest effects of one’s own prose; an urge to write and re-write the urban scene, less out of a desire to document than as a way of testing the agility of one’s language against all those things that once seemed familiar but now stare back more and more distantly the closer you look – all are signatures of a body of work that has consistently been drawn to the incidental, the minor and marginal.

etc. – from the Latin, et cetera: ‘and the rest (of such things)’ = ‘and so on’; variants: &c., &/c., &c., &ct., and &ca.

See Maryann Overstreet, Whales, Candlelight and Stuff Like That: General Extenders in English Discourse (Oxford University Press, 1999).
In Vladislavić’s most recent book, *The Loss Library*, he makes explicit his debt to Perec. This obsessive chronicler of Paris and master of ‘the art of enumeration’ (32) is discussed in the context of OuLiPo, the ‘Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle’ or ‘Workshop for Potential Literature’ founded in the 1960s by Raymond Queneau ‘& Céau’ (not my joke). Here writing was to be generated by concocting strict formulas, algorithms and other artificial constraints that would govern a particular piece of text with mathematical strictness.

For example: the lipogram, which excludes one or more letters. Perec’s 1969 novel *La Disparition* (*A Void*, 1995) dispensed with ‘e’ – he joked that all the unused letters had migrated to the 1972 work *Les Revenentes*, which uses no other vowels (and was translated into English – God knows how – as *The Exeter Text* in 1996). Palindromes, acrostics and anagrams abound. The official website of OuLiPo lists over 100 of these ‘contraintes’, showcasing one per month: ‘Rime bisexuelle’ (only possible in the Romance languages), ‘Baobab’ (which my French was too rusty to decipher: something about the pattern *bas / haut / bas*), ‘Pilish’, where the lengths of consecutive words match the digits of the number Pi (‘How I need a drink, alcoholic in nature, after the heavy lectures involving quantum mechanics!’). One of the most popular and generative formulas is that of S+7, in which you ‘Replace every noun in a text with the noun seven entries after it in a dictionary’ (‘Replace every novelty in a thanksgiving with the novelty seven enzymes after it in a difficulty’).

In the hands of a Perec, ‘the most endearing of these experimenters’, the results can be startling as he deploys formulas to evade the formulaic: ‘Constraints

A particularly severe version of the lipogram entitled the ‘Prisoner’s Constraint’ (also ‘Macao Constraint’) omits all letters with ascenders and descendents (b, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, p, q, t and y). The *pangrammatic lipogram* (or *lippogrammatic pangram*) is a text that uses every letter of the alphabet except one: ‘The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog’ (which excludes ‘s’).

‘René deserted then rented seventeen fez-dressed henchmen. Between the jebels, the deserts, the ergs where the steppes’ breezes seeded then deleted defenceless weeds, here erred these henchmen, needless brens, spent stens, nerveless épées, depleted steeds, kneeless gee-gees, bereft jennets.’


Keith Michael’s *Not a Wake* (2010) holds the record for the longest Pilish text, following this irrational, transcendental (both technical terms) and most mysterious of mathematical constants to a length of 10 000 digits.

3.14159265358979…

The kind of dictionary used for S+7 (also known as N+7) makes a huge difference, of course. This example was the product of the Collins Advanced Learners. The 1989 *OED* (the heftiest I could find in the library) produces: ‘Replace every nourish-father in a textlet with the nourish-father seven envelopes after in a dictyostele’ (where ‘nourish-father’ is an obsolete version of ‘foster-father’ and ‘dictyostele’ is something obscurely *Botanical*). As this suggests, the most exhaustive lexicons are not necessarily the best for this exercise (for one thing they do not allow you to travel enough semantic distance from the original terms). On the other hand, the splendid *Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* gives us (working from where the original words *would* have been and ignoring boring acronyms): ‘Replace every nunu in a thistleboom (*var*. disselboom) with the nunu seven Eskoms after it in a difaqane.’
are welcomed as a kind of resistance against which the imagination grinds and sparks. Difficulty often produces a daring imaginative response’ (32). But in other cases, the process (if pursued with utter rigour) can be rather painful for writer and reader alike. In his own example, from a section titled ‘Gross’, Vladislavić records an idea jotted down in his notebook in 1990: to write a novella in 144 paragraphs of 144 words, divided into 12 chapters of 12 paragraphs, each of those divided into 12-word sentences: ‘Simple arithmetic: $12^4 = 20,736$ words’ (31). But this particular formula became overbearing and onerous, keeping him awake at night:

How to proceed? Should one pour a rough cast say of 24,000 words and then chip it down to the right proportions? Or advance methodically one made-to-measure block at a time…The idea was crushing… I saw the concept grinding away like a small electric pepper-mill on a speckled granite kitchen-counter in a Sandton townhouse (36).

The throwaway image in the last line hits the note that makes his work distinctive: a self-deprecating narrative voice in which a playful European anti-realism meets the historical fact of a 21st-century African metropolis. The Parisian flâneur à la Baudelaire, Benjamin and Perec is ripped from the leisurely boulevards and dropped into a concrete encrustation on the Highveld that cares little for literary antics, but a lot about cars. With its corporate clusters and glossy, mass-produced surfaces, Johannesburg would seem to provide little purchase for a bookish intelligence more at home in second-hand shops stocked with Stevenson, Canetti and Calvino.

And yet over the last decade, Vladislavić, the most writerly of South African writers, has come to be celebrated as the pre-eminent chronicler of the city, or at least the (old) city centre – a veritable Bard of Bez Valley. So much so that in an interview (reproduced in a rich collection of critical pieces from Wits Press), he expresses:

‘I must confess: I cooked the books (just a little) with the S+7 exercise.

‘Not only has Vladislavić exhumed realities and intervals marginalised by society and History, but his texts tend to escape their own margins, moving beyond the delineations of the page and its text into seemingly unprofitable spaces, unconscious zones, intervals and gaps formerly regarded as beneath consideration. Unpopular qualities populate this writing: gentleness, self-effacing reticence, careful caution, close observation, scrupulously methodical discipline, impeccable criticality, wit, silence.’

some discomfort with the fact that has come to be
categorised as ‘the Jo’burg guy’ (50). The critical
enthusiasm for urban studies, he suggests, may have
become a filter blocking certain other elements of his
work, as well lines of continuity within the oeuvre.

This latest work, then, is a reminder of the
abstruse imaginative architectures that underlie both the
flagrantly postmodern early stories (collected and
reprinted in 2010 as Flashback Hotel) as well as the
more documentary texture of The Exploded View (2004)
and Portrait with Keys (2006). And as the rough casts
and made-to-measure blocks above suggest, technical or
builderly metaphors – metaphors of…not quite
constructivism, but maybe construct – can be found
whenever Vladislavić (the son of a motor mechanic)
discusses his own practice.

They suggest how (even if the constraint of
‘Gross’ proved too gross) his works carry the sense of
being governed by submerged and often non-verbal
logics. David Goldblatt’s photographs, the artworks of
Joachim Schönfeldt, conceptual installations, security
walls, highway interchanges, forgotten street furniture –
each of these have functioned as ‘narrative accelerators’
in different books. Not in any one-to-one set of
correspondences (Goldblatt seems rather mystified about
what on earth the text of TJ Double Negative might have
to do with his images) but rather as deep, DNA-like
processors that determine the surface text via complex
transformations, giving the prose its unexpected and
often beguiling shapes.

Characteristically then, the unfinishability of
‘Gross’ has been generated by (or absorbed into) another,
larger constraint (or conceit). The Loss Library is a
mediation on ‘unsettled accounts’: that list of incomplete
stories and unfleshed-out ideas that every writer trails

‘The war memorial crumbling away on a traffic
island opposite the Darras Centre tells the history
of the city in a single word. “The following men
of the Bezuidenhout Valley lost their lives in the
Great War”, it says…A century comes and goes
in the definite article. When this memorial was
commissioned, the Bezuidenhout Valley was still
a feature of the landscape. Now it is impossible
to think of “Bezuidenhout Valley” as anything
but a suburb.’

Ivan Vladislavić, Portrait with Keys: Joburg &
behind them. So we have a slim volume in 11 (not 12) sections; in each, a prompt for a future work (typically a notebook jotting from the 90s) is combined with later notes and glosses on why it remained unrealised. In OuLiPian terms, the subtractive is made generative, producing a variegated text that is less a lament on things not done than a wider meditation on creativity, finitude and (to quote the back cover) ‘the allure of the incomplete’.

In it we see refracted a whole spectrum of losses, absences and aporias. The title story imagines, Borges-like, a guided tour of a library containing the canon’s great unwritten texts: from ‘The mature work of Keats? That’s a drawcard’, to Kafka’s late phase: ‘The disappointing end of his career when he was hardly even Kafkaesque’ (58). They can be looked at (or in the case of descendants with a special letter of permission, even held for a minute), but never read: to do so would cause ripples of disturbance in the space-time-text continuum of all the world’s libraries.

There is loss as the lost, as when two suitcases of drafts and work in progress vanishes in transit following a writer’s residency in Stuttgart. This despite being reinforced with packing tape and having the narrator’s name and address inscribed on all twelve surfaces – ‘two loaded dice freighted with my work of the past year’ (an image that deftly signals the aleatoric dimension to much of his writing). But there is also loss as surfeit, as knowing too much: ‘Mrs B’ describes a passing fascination with the wife of the colonial naturalist, who appears in a 1926 volume by her husband W. Douglas Burden, titled *Dragon Lizard of Komodo: An Expedition to the Lost World of the Dutch East Indies*.

Finding it among the second-hand books at a church fête, the Vladislavić-narrator is at first intrigued by its photographs and their captions, but then makes the mistake of reading it methodically: ‘This reading muddied the
waters. It left me with a fuller sense of the Burdens and their world. I liked them less than I wanted to’ (26). The distaste is for their Orientalist prejudices, but also for the ease with which he finds himself judging these figures, pinned to the corkboard of history like the specimens that they collected in the jungles of Komodo: ‘The past is a sitting duck. Bringing it home for the pot does a writer no credit’ (28). Fragmentary and oblique, it is nonetheless an incisive meditation on what it means for the contemporary writer to engage the colonial archive.

‘The Book Lover’, though, is similar story from the same period that did get written. It begins when its narrator discovers that the volumes he has been picking out from second-hand dealers all once belonged to a woman named Helena Shein. The narrative is driven by a growing, almost erotic obsession to track down and reconstitute her now dispersed collection. It points to how much of Vladislavić’s oeuvre is generated by found objects and texts (another method favoured by OuLiPo), often taking its cues from the random, scattershot libraries of the postcolony: unaccredited and flagrantly subjective (or subjunctive?) archives where the very absence of any claim to completeness enables new forms of creativity. In ‘The Book Lover’ Pirandello is spliced with Trevor Huddleston, Sarah Gertrude Millin and (most importantly) Barbara Cartland – her 42nd novel, A Ghost in Monte Carlo, furnishes a kind of deep narrative template.

There is surely an important academic study to be written (one that I will no doubt never get around to) on significant encounters with (apparently insignificant) libraries in South African literary history: Peter Abrahams discovering W.E.B. du Bois in Johannesburg’s Bantu Men’s Social Centre in 1937; Nadine Gordimer escaping from Springs into 19th-century Russia; J. M. Coetzee coming across the records of German South West Africa while pursuing doctoral research in Texas. One could even add Mohandas Gandhi receiving John Ruskin’s Unto this Last in 1904, and so being inspired to create

‘A bookmark charged with meaning. There are any number of reasons why something like a photograph might be left behind in a book, but the most compelling is that it marks the point where the reader gave up, where the story failed. An unfinished book in a second-hand shop is doubly charged. Again, there are many reasons why a book might fall into a dealer’s hands, but the one that compels attention is the death of the reader. A bookmark in such a book might well indicate the point where the story of a life broke off.’


‘Furthermore: many prisoners underestimate the prison library. Of course prison libraries in general are a jumble: the books have been gathered at random, from donations by charitable organizations that receive warehouse remainders from publishers, or from books left behind by released prisoners. Devotional books and third-rate novels abound. Nevertheless I believe that a political prisoner must squeeze blood even from a stone.’

his experiments in communal living at Tolstoy Farm outside Johannesburg.

How were these conservative colonial archives and idiosyncratic, often derivative collections put to uses for which they were never intended? And how did the future unconscious of these found texts shape the course of our cultural history? In a detail that could have come straight out of a Vladislavić story, Anthony Sampson’s biography of Mandela tells us that a Red Cross grant of 1976 intended for stocking the Robben Island prison library was spent entirely on the works of Daphne du Maurier.

It is a reminder that the best way to approach the South African real might be via the surreal. Citing the experimental works of Afrikaans writers like John Miles and Etienne Leroux as early influences, Vladislavić has remarked that realism is not the only way, nor necessarily the most profound way, of engaging with the society around you.

Read today, the stories from his first collection Missing Persons (1989) come across as an excoriating critique of high apartheid’s tawdry monumentalisms and warped masculinities. Not unlike J. G. Ballard’s LSD-laced cross-section of the 1960s, they offer an exploded view of those things that haunted the 1980s white imaginary: the suitcase of the Station Bomber; newsreader Michael de Morgan talking about ‘unrest’; the tapeworm from the ‘Diary of Tsafendas’, reincarnated in the final story as the pool-cleaning Kreepy Krauly (A South African invention! as everyone loved to point out when I was growing up – along with razor wire, petrol from coal and dolosse). As in all the works that follow, local brand names are leaned on and made strange: Cadac, Cold Water Omo, Wall and All, Exclusive Books (perhaps the worst name ever for a bookshop?) Vladislavić ‘makes his stories by hanging around these tiny junctions of language’, writes Tony Morphet in an early review, ‘and watching what might be going in and what might be coming out’ (Marginal Spaces, 22).

‘An even stranger arrangement later was chief warder Du Preez’s catalogue of purchased books. Over time the books could not be traced because most were filed under “T” since so many titles started with “The”. There was little improvement by the 1970s. The library catalogue, for example, listed The Tempest as science fiction, and Romeo and Juliet appeared as “author anonymous”.’


VLADISLAVIĆ: ‘I like a work that is engaged with the society in which it is written, but the question is really whether one has to write realism in order to engage with society adequately… It’s possible to engage deeply with your social reality without producing realism… I think there’s a case to be made for the work of fiction as a highly designed imaginative structure, with a more complicated relationship to its context than realism usually allows.’

One can make a political case for this attention to the (apparently) marginal and minor, as many of the pieces in Gaylard’s volume do. With the décor of daily life being slowly defamiliarised (as if by literary paint stripper), the normalcy of larger social structures is put into question, as is the almost limitless human capacity to naturalise injustice and the pain of others. For Perec in Paris, avoiding the etc. is a writing exercise; in Vladislavić’s Johannesburg it cannot but carry an awareness of the violence encoded by the smallest particles of language. What crushing weight the ‘general extenders’ etc. and ens. must have carried in the documents of the apartheid bureaucracy – a system that entrenched one version of difference by collapsing all other kinds. The anti-realism of these early stories catches us in that ‘automisation’ of perception that the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky deplored: the deadening process of generalisation, assumption, habitualisation (\& what-what) that ‘devours work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war’ (19).

For all that, Vladislavić remains a writer’s writer, or perhaps even a writer’s writer, given how narrow his appeal must be in contemporary South Africa. How are we to take this fascination with libraries, lost or found, in a place where (as the Equal Education campaign reminds us) over 90% of schools have no such thing in the first place? ‘He reads the dictionary for fun!’ – this was the taunt levelled at bookworms during my schooldays by corn-fed rugby players, less out of cruelty than bewilderment and, perhaps, pity. There was a library, but the only well-thumbed books there were by the likes of Frederick Forsyth and Ken Follett. You could up-end them on your palm and they would (like butterflies) fall open on the dirtiest sex scenes, their spines cracked by generations of hormonal boarders.

In Vladislavić’s ‘Dictionary Birds’, the narrator owns up to recreational dictionary use. For 15 years, whenever he happens across the name of a rare bird amid the verbiage – a ‘Dolosse were the knucklebones of goats or sheep similar in shape to the letter “H” with one leg turned 90 degrees. They were among the bones thrown into the dust by African witchdoctors, or sangomas, to access advice from the ancestors. The game that was played with dolosse by Voortrekker children was called “knucklebone”. These bone toys were also often thought of as imaginary oxen. Merrifield replicated these bones on a grand scale in concrete - making dolosse that weighed 20 tons apiece to armour his breakwater.’ www.southafrica.info/business/trends/innovation/s/dolosse (Accessed November 2011).
piculet, a widgeon, a capercaillie – he has made a note of it in ‘a dove-grey file’, but still not bagged a full alphabet. He could, of course, sit down with the Oxford of a Sunday afternoon and page through it for trophies, but this would be unsporting:

Beating systematically through the dictionary would be like shooting birds in a cage. You might think that a dictionary bird is a tame one, no matter how it is found, but in the thickets of language every creature is wild. (79)

It is one of many passages which show a respect for the opaque, serendipitous workings of creative process – how ideas and ‘images’ (in Ezra Pound’s sense) should not be forced, or leaned on too hard. To me it also suggests the paradox whereby a writer can sound most like themselves even when they are following closest in the tracks of their heroes. The Loss Library forms a map of its author’s reading over many years, one where the often-noted influences (Borges, Calvino, Canetti) are now joined by other newer voices, like W. G. Sebald and Geoff Dyer. There is a riff on hats in 20th-century photography taken from Dyer’s The Ongoing Moment, which is in turn (I learnt recently when browsing through About Looking) in turn adapted from his literary hero, John Berger, who writes about the suit in 20th-century photography.

Paging through The Loss Library was like attending a gathering of my favourite non-fiction writers, and finding that they are all old friends. It is certainly a rather male gathering, just as some readers might find Vladislavić’s non-fictional persona the purveyor of a rather male voice: a carefully managed, essayistic performance that is by turns erudite, naive, unassuming, but always highly controlled. Although the context may have changed, traces of the flâneur remain, that figure who (in a paradox fundamental to literary Romanticism) wants to be both anonymous and focal at the same time: drifting aimlessly with the currents of the city, but also at the centre of his (and it is a ‘his’) own, self-created world.
But if this is a scrupulous and bookish voice, it is nonetheless an inclusive one. *Portrait with Keys* must be one of the most ‘open’ of all South African texts: by turns a memoir, a writer’s diary and (to borrow another concept from Perec) a ‘user’s manual’ – to the Gorilla steering lock, to Johannesburg, and to itself. I have found it a uniquely rewarding book to assign for university students, a DIY text that virtually does the teaching for you. In the different ‘itineraries’ (short, medium or long) offered by the index, it makes explicit the fact that it can be re-assembled in different ways, showing us what the process of reading actually entails, and how complex and creative an act this can be.

The classes worked (themselves) towards an understanding of ‘readership’ not in terms of the dull dictionary definition (‘n. 1 the readers of a newspaper *etc.* 2 the number and extent of these’) but as a process, a discipline, something to be learned and honed. And readership that leads to writership: Vladislavić is a (writer’s) writer’s writer in the deeper, more enabling sense that his work leads you feel that you might (at least until that blank moment when you sit down with a notepad and actually try) produce prose not unlike this. Even from the less engaged students, *Portrait with Keys* drew forth end-of-term essays very different from the usual (some dreary ‘accredited’ article downloaded from JSTOR, and re-paraphrased just enough to evade the online plagiarism checker). Taking their cue from a scene where the narrator’s bunch of keys becomes a source of fascination to a photographer from abroad, one student asked us to explore what kinds of text our own keys would generate. This most ordinary object array was made to yield surprisingly deep narratives of security, loss, dwelling, intimacy, and memory.
As someone at an African university (and wondering how to put across what ‘doing English literature’ might mean in the most relevant and welcoming, way), for me the most intriguing question then becomes: how does Vladislavić’s work manage to be both abstruse and accommodating? He is after all, as Gaylard reminds us, one of South Africa’s most sought-after editors, someone who has worked behind the scenes on influential texts by Antjie Krog, Jonny Steinberg and Peter Harris. So how does this approach manage to combine a respect for the autonomy of creative process with the exactitude of the editor-grammarian? What makes his oeuvre scrupulous without being elitist, stringent without being dismissive?

As the attention to brand names has already suggested, I think that part of the answer may lie in the writing’s supple response to a commerce-saturated society. The fustiness of Vladislavić’s dictionary-loving protagonists coexists with a remarkable openness to the mediascapes of contemporary Johannesburg. His prose explores with unusual candour the options left to the writerly imagination in a place (which could be so many places) defined by gated precincts and slick surfaces: the kind of mass-produced individuality signified by the granite kitchen counter of the Sandton townhouse. The interest in anachronisms (and tomasons) is then balanced by their opposite: signs of that which is still emergent and not yet expressed – markers of futurity which can only just begin to be discerned.

Particularly in The Exploded View, one feels an imagination pushing back against a relentlessly corporate reality. South Africa is, after all, a place where ‘creative’ is first and foremost noun meaning advertising flunky; in the country’s popular discourses, there is, it seems, simply no embarrassment or reservation about the commercialisation of absolutely everything. Instead of remaining sequestered

‘The term “tomason” was coined by Genpei Akasegawa to describe a purposeless object found on a city street…A tomason is a thing that has become detached from its original purpose…I am grateful to have been given a category that will hold certain chance observations so tidily.’
Ivan Vladislavić, ‘City Centre’ (2004), iii.

‘But in fact, Cuba leveraged all five of my senses. The idea of Cuba opened up a multi-dimensional desire incorporating a complete sensory approach... This was not just a destination, it was a unique sensory experience that differentiated the country from any of the other 243 countries in the world. Almost by accident, Brand Cuba has stumbled upon the very processes that point the way toward the next generation of brand building. Amazingly, this Communist country that has vilified capitalism and consumerism for decades has managed to:
- maintain a single message
- promulgated by senior management consistently
- bought up and lived by all the citizens
- been bundled into an alluring brand essence
- and disseminated through sensory cues that cover touch, taste, smell, sight and sound
And all this happened by chance. Can you imagine if it had been strategically thought out?’
From the Encyclopaedia of Brands and Branding in South Africa (2007).
in the library, Vladislavić’s prose rises to this challenge: the pastel expanse of the faux-Tuscan housing estates; the laminated, multiracial cheerfulness espoused by highway billboards (for News Café: ‘It’s about the vibe’); the über-malls that take the place of medieval fortifications here on the Highveld: Northgate, Southgate, Eastgate, Westgate.

But (and this is what makes his work distinctive), even while finely attuned to the erasure of socio-historical texture that accompanies that privatisation and securitisation of the 21st-century metropolis, this voice is not strident, despairing or disgusted. It is critical (in the widest sense) without being censorious. And this makes it very different to David Lurie’s disaffection with his ‘post-literate’ students in Disgrace (1999), or Stephen Watson’s melancholic version of Cape Town as ‘one big Club Med’. Watson’s A Writer’s Diary (1997), also a kind of city logbook, makes an interesting counterpoint to Portrait with Keys. All too aware of the kind of double-binds that a post-Romantic imagination seeking immanence, authenticity and silence gets itself into in a place like South Africa, he turns at one point to Philip Roth at his most savage: ‘How could he leave? Everything he hated was here’.

Vladislavić’s writing is different; it works to, if not re-enchant the corporate cityscape, then at least to imbue with some kind of human affect; to probe for its habitable niches. Rather than simply railing impotently against late capitalism, the writing (and Ballard comes to mind here again) attempts to understand its most intimate effects on us, on our subjectivities and our cognition. Holding to the embargo on the etc., it manages to show the poverty of economised language, without extending this into a misanthropic series of generalisations on popular culture more generally.

19 September 1996

‘In next to no time the place has been re-stylised, as if reality itself were no more that a species of hair-do, this city is latest, vogue boutique.

Not far into the next century I suspect that Cape Town, a city remarkable for having a mountain in the middle of it, will have managed to relegate even its natural environment to a kind of sideshow...For the moment, though, as one half of it takes on the patina, the glaze of a giant Club Med, one sees clearly why the feel of the place has changed. More and more, it has become a city which specialises in marrying fantastically sophisticated surfaces (technologically-speaking) and utterly childish values.

And strange to say, it is precisely that combination which defines the very texture – which is to say, the feel – of contemporary amorality.

While Watson wrestles with the difficulties of being a nature writer in the face of rampant commodification, climate change and poststructuralist literary theory, Vladislavić begins from the premise that (as the dustjacket reminds us) ‘In Johannesburg, the Venice of the South, the backdrop is always a man-made one…Nature is for other people, in other places’. It is a lowering of the literary temperature that pays great dividends, allowing a wry yet inclusive irony to play over a cityscape where nothing is sacred. The backward glance of the pastoral is abandoned in favour of a future-directed prose more open to (and less judgemental of) the aesthetics and subcultures of a growing African metropolis.

In one of the most incisive essays from the Marginal Spaces volume, Stefan Helgesson pursues this enquiry by exploring how Vladislavić’s work engages English in all its registers and varieties, concerned ‘not only with refined, self-glorifying levels of language but also its most instrumentalised forms’ (186). Rather than simply abhorring or excising the flattened commercial language that colonises so much of our public space – in the manner of Adorno and the Frankfurt School, or the ascetic mode of Coetzee, who ‘purges the English language of dross’ and ‘accedes to the austerity induced by history’ (179) – Vladislavić’s writing explicitly engages this crass materiality. It ‘descends into this particular linguistic inferno and returns – enriched’ (186):

‘There is a process of intellectual colonisation going on today that is far more massive and totalising than anything Victorian England could muster. It originates in the culture factories of the United States, and can be detected in the most intimate corners of our lives, or if not in our own then in our student’s lives: their speech, the rhythms of their bodies, their affective behaviour including their sexual behaviour, their modes of thinking. This colonising process is the cultural arm of neoliberalism, the new world order. It passes my comprehension that we as academic intellectuals in Africa and of Africa should want to spend our time tracking down the residual ghosts of the nineteenth-century British empire, when it is clearly more urgent to recognize and confront the new global imperialism.’


Rather than subscribe to an expressivist romantic paradigm, he flaunts the material conditions of possibility of English in South African and debunks, in passing, the hierarchy of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. (181)

As such it is an oeuvre that offers a deep thinking-through of what it might mean to ‘provincialise’ English: it logs the difficulties but also liberties that accrue from
abandoning prescriptive grammars for descriptive ones. Freed from an idealised notion of what ‘English Literature’ might be – whether one calls this a romantic, metropolitan, Arnoldian or Leavisite paradigm – it is able to bring the language closer to ‘home’ even while relativising it and making it transnational. Released from its bind to any single place or authority, South African English is made ‘malleable, multivocal, dialogical’, and the dream of an OED-anchored discourse itself ‘replaced by a bold acknowledgement of language as a mode of becoming, rather than being, or being done’ (187).

The trajectory that the narrator picks out through these difficulties in a section from The Loss Library titled ‘Gravity Addict’ gives a final clue as to how this strategy is working. The phrase first makes an appearance as graffiti on one of the ‘rolls’ in Portrait with Keys: lists of local street detritus made when the Perecian urge to exhaust the ordinary was evidently at its strongest. In the notebooks, it gives rise to a mysterious character – the Gravity Addict – who leaves messages on answer-phones but never quite gets written. And why? Following a meditation on Elias Canetti’s unfulfilled aim to write an essay on the art of falling, and a detour via Don DeLillo’s Falling Man, we are given the reason. One day, waiting at an ATM in Eastgate Mall, the narrator notices these very words printed on the shirt collar in front of him:

For a disorienting moment I felt as if I had stumbled into the pages of my unwritten story and found the Gravity Addict himself. Then the realization that ‘Gravity Addict’, the phrase that had charmed my imagination for five years, was no more than a clothing label, a brand of leisurewear, sluiced over me like ice water. By the time I got home, my interest in the ‘Gravity Addict’ had melted away so completely I could barely bring myself to google it. (71)

‘…Since the vocabulary is sucked dry, it must be made to vibrate with intensity…’

The fact that ‘google’ appears uncapitalised in this last sentence must, I suspect, have caused its author-editor a particular twinge of pain.

Nonetheless, even if the original story met its nemesis in the mall, we still have before us this unusual experiment in non-fiction. It is one which offers an exploded view of Vladislavić’s practice, making visible those buried structures that allow the prose to oscillate with such frequency and fluidity between the imaginative and the prosaic, the private and public, depth and surface. The bookish cleverness is alternately chided and provoked by a virulently non-literary world. And in an increasingly marketised publishing scene (where the dictionary birds never stop twittering in their efforts to accrue cultural capital) one feels the power in the admission that this kind of reading and writing – slow, non-instrumental, in a printed codex not on a screen – remains (and perhaps this is its value) an utterly marginal activity.

**Works cited**


