

At Home with Ivan Vladislavić

An African Flaneur Greens the
Postcolonial City

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Introduction

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Introduction

Home

This hint of divergence from the high road commemorates the small, oblique acts of resistance to power that people make in their everyday lives. (“The Cold Storage Club” *The Loss Library* 95)

“Vlad the detailer” is how Ivan Vladislavić is sometimes known amongst his friends. “Vlad the impaler”, or Vlad Țepeș, was a Hungarian voivode in the medieval era, reputedly the inspiration for Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. This pun on his Eastern European origins and his writing style reveals the most obvious and significant formal aspect of his writing: its eye for detail, texture, and the small or marginal. Vladislavić’s pixilated fiction is enabled by an observant and forensic consciousness. We might regard the tension between this precise, located awareness and larger historical forces as the energiser of his fiction.

Detailism is not Vladislavić’s only formal forte. In *The Distance*, a quasi-autobiographical novel, he describes his own writing thus: “the well-known attributes are there, the eye for detail – too much of it, if you ask me – the magical flourishes, the social concern” (222). Detail, magical flourishes, social concern can all make demands on the reader. Highly detailed writing does not encourage the eye to skate over its surface. Neither is the writing of Johannesburg’s foremost contemporary scribe immediately immersive. Vladislavić does not make many concessions to the reader. Explanations or manifestos are largely absent. There are no glossaries in his books. He will not bowdlerise his writing for the sake of the global market. Eschewing resolution and closure, his stories are often mysterious. The reader has to work to interpret and feel at home in his minimalism that does not make everything obvious. As readers we are challenged to find meaning, to play and imagine, by this literature. Even when we do find meaning, we seldom feel that we have fully grasped a story. I hope that this book will go some way to explaining the more gnomic moments in Vladislavić’s fiction and be a reader’s companion. To this end, almost all of Vladislavić’s writing is

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examined in this book, though for the sake of length I have had to prune a few stories.

Whilst Vladislavić's writing can be obscure, the effect of his honed attention to the lived texture of everyday life in Johannesburg is quite the opposite: it conjures a sense of home. One moment in relation to Vladislavić's writing that has stayed with me was when Derrick Moore, a recently arrived fellow migrant to Johannesburg, told me that reading Vladislavić had helped him to feel at home. If this writing enabled Derrick to feel at home here, then, given that Johannesburg is a city of migrants, how many more people might also be aided in this way? Vladislavić's pruned prose is solidly rooted in the local, precisely placed in Johannesburg's sun-bleached lattice of streets. This models how we may create a sense of home and even an ethics of belonging, no matter how alienated we may be. This, I think, is the significance of his writing for the people in this city and maybe for urban dwellers everywhere as all cities are centres of migration. His attention to the city as a lived place humanises the industrial mining metropolis of Johannesburg, renders apartheid's walled monuments habitable, and enables him and his readers to call the city of transients home.

Feeling at home has significance because we care about what we know well. Conversely, we tend not to care so much about what is far from our ken. It could even be said that the issue of belonging is a key question today, because so many of the selfish, greedy, and destructive things we do appear to come from a sense of lack of consequence that stems from unbelonging, anonymity, alienation. Modernity has shattered the family and dispersed its members to every nook and cranny of the world's cities, creating increasing numbers of atomised individuals. Much of modern literature, from *Hamlet* to "Paradise Lost", from *The Catcher in the Rye* to *Trainspotting*, from *Madame Bovary* to *L'Etranger*, concerns itself with the issue of belonging and its opposite. This is not just a question of feeling comfortable and convivial, as in Jacques Derrida's *Of Hospitality*. Today it is clear that the lack of a sense of home on the earth has enabled us to abuse the planet to the point of ecological collapse. Many of the ecological problems humanity faces are a result of alienation from nature and the places in which we live. What we care for we tend to look after. Ecological destruction is an index of our lack of feeling. A feeling of belonging, however, may even become a model for future living.

Of course, unbelonging is not necessarily unethical and a strong feeling of community may not result in good ethics. Home may promote parochialism, exclusivity, even ignorance and xenophobia, rather than burgeoning planetary consciousness. Nothing is above criticism in Vladislavić, including the home, and he critiques too insular and centripetal a sense of home and belonging. Moreover, home is invariably constructed in his writing. Ersatz confections of authenticity and easy belonging are called by Salman Rushdie "imaginary homelands" that

may bear little relation to the actual place, time, and fellow citizens. Vladislavić similarly repeatedly criticises easy authenticities as a kind of local exoticism. The very locatedness of his fiction belies touristic exoticisms, which he calls “somewhere else’s somewhere else” (“*101 Detectives*” 40), yet he is aware that the local is equally constructed. Hence in Vladislavić’s fiction home and belonging are often complex, hard-won, and insecure. The narrator in “Hair Shirt”, for instance, describes a visit to his girlfriend’s family thus:

As Jews in a conservative, Christian world, I reasoned, they must understand the complications of belonging. Relieved and disarmed, I was able to express the contradictory feelings about my homeland I usually kept to myself, how I loved and hated it because, like it or not, the threads of my life had been twisted into its fabric and could not be unravelled. (*101 Detectives* 18)

Given the “complications of belonging”, what kind of home does Vladislavić create then? His sense of home is perhaps best summed up in a 2022 story “On the Verge”, which describes attempts by immigrants to feel at home via mnemonic objects: “it is clear that such small things, rendered beautiful by the memories they’ve absorbed, anchor him lightly in time and space” (18). This “light anchoring” through familiar objects and practices, in this case seeds from the narrator’s mother and the process of growing them, is a good metaphor for Vladislavić’s sense of home. His “critical” and “light” attachment avoids some of the more “twisted” “complications of belonging”, refusing both patriotism and detachment. His writing might be said to avoid the binary between the authentic and the exotic: by defamiliarising the everyday, he finds the exotic in the authentic; via political alertness, he finds the authentic in the exotic. The sense of home in his oeuvre suggests that any sustainable future will have to be far from both depoliticised globalism and naive identity politics.

Vladislavić establishes this critical, light sense of home in Johannesburg through three major stages in his oeuvre thus far. These stages should be understood as sequential prominences of themes that have been apparent throughout.

1. Vladislavić’s first three books critiqued late apartheid’s imperial monumentalism, developing a minimalist and satirical sensibility as an act of resistance.
2. The minute attention to particulars of this minimalism led in turn to his creation of an African flaneur in *The Restless Supermarket*, *Portrait with Keys*, and *The Exploded View*. Johannesburg had never been so finely observed before in literature. This was at the crest of a wave of cultural production beginning in the early 2000s that has put the city’s textures and rhythms on the map.

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3. Walking, driving, and observing the city, this African flaneur developed his “internal GPS” in his subsequent works. This “internal GPS” was not only a proprioceptive awareness of geospatial surrounds, but also a sense of home. Home is significant because we tend to take care of what we know well. Ivan Vladislavić attempts to establish a sense of home amidst pervasive alienation and in so doing connects people to landscape.

The argument of the book is that through these three stages Vladislavić greens the postcolonial city by creating an African flaneur who is able to find a home in the often inhospitable and ever-changing city of Johannesburg via an “internal GPS”. “Greening” here should be understood not so much as establishing urban farms or other immediately practical interventions, but as the attuning of consciousness to local ecologies, in line with Beatley and Newman who emphasise community between humans and nature. Whilst there are many types of green urbanism, from principles (Lehmann & Mainguy) to practical implementations (new battery technologies), my focus is on Vladislavić’s contribution, which is that of an artist. Vladislavić’s flaneur greens the city by finding a home there and by reducing consumption. I find that his intervention is sustainable because it operates primarily at the level of consciousness, though it remains largely anthropocentric.

An ecological lens of this sort may be blind to Vladislavić’s literary sensibility. Vladislavić is nothing if not self-reflexive, which tends to circumvent a strong sense of purpose and engagement. His writing is not in the first instance about saving the planet. Nevertheless, Vladislavić is sensitive to environment and context and his feeling for nature is apparent in that it is the constant measure of “progress” in his work. Further, whilst much of greening the city consists of practical strategies, if this is only an obligation then it may not be as sustainable as it might be. Literature can contribute to the sustainability of ecological strategies by emphasising the psycho-affective aspects of embedding within a place.

This book explores what sense of ecology, and hence of belonging, is apparent, or otherwise, in Vladislavić’s writing. It is informed by theories of home (Derrida) and of affect (Gregg & Seigworth, Ratcliffe, David Hume, Ahmed). It is attuned to the long history of ecological writing, ranging from the Romantics to Rebecca Solnit, from Arne Naess to Helen Tiffin. It is also illuminated by research into nature-based strategies for greening cities (Lehmann & Mainguy, Beatley & Newman, Kahn, Brantz & Dümpelmann), which is increasingly important given that more than 50% of humans live in cities, a figure set to grow. The scholarly work on ecology in Southern African literature is important, such as Dan Wylie’s volume *Toxic Belonging: Identity and Ecology in Southern Africa*. Recently, the literature on urban ecology has shown

signs of growth, as in *Sprout: An Eco-Urban Poetry Journal*. Bringing academic work such as this to bear on the fiction of Ivan Vladislavić, I hope to make a small contribution to greening the city via culture.

The Virtual City

Johannesburg, as people often remark, is one of the few major cities in the world that has no river, lake or ocean. It has a reef, of course, but no diving In Johannesburg, the Venice of the South, the backdrop is always a man-made one. We have planted a forest the birds endorse. For hills, we have mine dumps covered with grass. We do not wait for time and the elements to weather us, we change the scenery ourselves, to suit our moods. Nature is for other people, in other places. (*Portrait with Keys* 18 & 31)

Johannesburg spreads out in every direction from the Witwatersrand on the rolling plain of the Highveld, 1750 metres above sea level. It is part of the province of Gauteng, Sotho-Tswana for “place of gold”, which sprawls from the Suikerbosrand hills in the south to the Magaliesberg in the north, from Springs in the east to Krugersdorp in the west. This megalopolis is over a hundred kilometres in diameter and takes more than an hour to drive across on an empty highway. Gauteng includes Johannesburg, Tshwane, Soweto, Benoni, and 23 other listed cities and towns, with five metropolitan municipalities. A massive conurbation of more than 11 million people, it varies widely in society, culture, and ethnicity, from the poorest illegal immigrants living in shanties to wealthy landlords in mansions.

As Vladislavić noted in *Portrait with Keys*, Johannesburg’s location is not an intuitively obvious place to build a city. Johannesburg is “the Venice of the South”, an entirely artificial conurbation that is not situated on a watercourse, natural site, or trade route. It would not be here if it were not for the gold. George Harrison stumbled upon ore-bearing rock on Langlaagte farm and Paul Kruger granted a small patch of land between the Boer farms for the establishment of Johannesburg in 1886. “Egoli”, place of gold, was a capitalist undertaking from the beginning. It might be argued that a city is almost by definition an imperial place. Sundering itself from the landscape whilst dependent upon the produce of that land, it establishes itself as a citadel of centralisation and control.

As a mining city Johannesburg has grown in fits and starts, higgledy-piggledy, out of the tents, sand pyramids, and quick-fix service centres of its prospecting town origins. It was a mine and tent city before anything else and something of that artificiality and transience remains. As Mark Gevisser noted, this is literally an undermined city:

There are 270 of these mine dumps spread over 400 square kilometres, fashioned from more than 400 million tons of earth removed

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from the mines ... you can trace the route of the ore-bearing reef from above by following their line from east to west just south of the ridges of the Witwatersrand ... the green canopy of Johannesburg urban forest spreads northward from this, while the tightly packed, treeless, zinc-roofed mass of township houses, glinting silver in the sun, is to the south of it. (Gevisser 214)

Johannesburg is built on an opposition between nature and culture. This is a virtual, not to say fake, city.

Part of this virtuality is the enforced separation of people that characterised Johannesburg during the apartheid era and endures within its architecture. Apartheid separated races and cultures, creating upper and underground classes that paralleled the city above ground and the deep mines (Nuttall & Mbembe). From the start the white city officials feared the “promiscuous herding” (Bonner & Segal 12) of different races. Using the bubonic plague of 1904 as an excuse, the Council swiftly separated the races and cleared the slums. From where Braamfontein is today, 1358 Africans were moved to Klipspruit, 13 kilometres from Johannesburg in what is now Soweto. By 1905 no Africans were permitted to live in Johannesburg except for domestic workers who could live in the backyards of their employers’ properties, or mine workers who had to reside in industrial compounds (Bonner & Segal 13). The 1913 land act confined blacks to reserves via forced removals and influx control. During the apartheid era in the Transvaal 58 black communities and the black residential areas of 29 towns were removed and the inhabitants relocated (Platzky & Walker 8–12, 44–5, 51–3). Vladislavić repeatedly emphasises the walls that apartheid built and the attempts by people to escape them. This virtual and split city is a direct result of colonial history, which persists in its architectures and demarcations.

Mining not only created enormous dumps above ground, it also polluted the aquifers in Gauteng with acid water below ground. Johannesburg might have become a truly virtual ghost town as the gold ran out, but it was too big and flourished instead. Today Gauteng’s sprawl could be seen as a model of future living in which nature is subjected to human growth so voracious that it resembles rampaging bacteria from space.

Whilst its mere existence might be regarded as an ecological as well as human crime, various other criminalities were common in the tent city. The centrality of vice to Johannesburg’s identity has never completely vanished. But what makes Johannesburg’s history specific, different from other lawless frontier boom-towns, is that it has not only a figurative underworld but an actual underground too: the subterranean world dug out by the mines. This second underground is the place where the grossest criminality occurred: the abysmal conditions of black labour. Gevisser describes it as “Johannesburg’s vertical equation: the deeper down the

workers dug, the higher up the bosses could build their modernist Manhattanish skyline” (149–50). Virtuality is also verticality, the dreaming high rises of the city were built upon exploitation, creating a literal underground unconscious. If Vladislavić’s understanding of Johannesburg’s virtuality is exposed by the contrast between nature and culture, it is dramatised by the effects of this upon people. The mines required large numbers of workers who came from all over Southern Africa, establishing the notorious migrant labour system, which devastated families and traditional African cultures. Everyone experiences something of immigration, dislocation, exile, and alienation in this Afropolis. Today Johannesburg’s virtuality is walled. The dream city must be protected from the unconscious, from its own history, not to mention the poor and the criminal gangs. Constant surveillance of these walls characterises Johannesburg. Urban alienation and enclosure are recurrent features.

Nevertheless, for many Johannesburgers, there are opportunities in the city that create a propulsive energy and the intoxication of innovation not available elsewhere. An enormous melting pot of ethnicities and histories, the city encourages enterprise and mixing. For these Johannesburgers, it is a golden city. Moreover, for all that Johannesburg is a walled virtuality, it also has beautiful hills and is the world’s largest man-made forest. Whilst much of this forest is not indigenous and a good deal of the water to grow it has come from elsewhere, the trees add longevity and beauty, not to mention producing huge amounts of oxygen whilst absorbing carbon, creating a fertile microclimate. Throughout Vladislavić’s work, nature relativises the city and culture; it is a touchstone for him. He quite regularly contrasts the attempts to order and control nature with untamed, untended spaces. This echoes his liking for the subconscious, the wild well-spring of his writing. Hence, whilst it is difficult to “green” this industrial city at an emotional and psychological level, Johannesburg is, like all cities, an evanescent surface layer on top of nature. A small shift in consciousness, or a glance out of the window, is all that is required for us to remember this.

Johannesburg is also characterised by a healthy pragmatism that Vladislavić celebrates: “Joburgers get on with things. This jaunty making-do is an admirable trait, for the most part” (“Flow” 11). Vladislavić has made do by writing of the place in which he lives, structuring his texts so that they convey something of the feel of living here. Johannesburg is inseparable from his writing. As he suggests, “it is almost impossible to describe literary structures without resorting to architectural metaphor” (“Frieze” *The Loss Library* 47).

Internal GPS

Perhaps our first language was a dialogue with the earth in prints of hoof and paw? (*The Restless Supermarket* 162)

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Vladislavić links bodies to place via his proprioceptive sense, what I think of as “internal GPS”. Zoë Wicomb defines the proprioceptive sense in this way: “proprioceptivity is bound up with the body’s sensation of occupying a point in space, and with the terms under which it does so” (*Marginal Spaces* 153). Proprioceptivity or kinaesthetic awareness is present in muscles, tendons, and the central nervous system, locating the precise position of the body in space. Vladislavić has a highly developed proprioceptive sensibility attuned to the cardinal points of the compass and the streets of Johannesburg. In other words, the sensitive neural matrix of the poet gives him an ecological consciousness, whether he is in a city or in the countryside.

A highly developed proprioceptivity reveals context in a stark light, showing not only a place, but also its present, its roots in the past, and its dreams for the future. In other words, an internal GPS establishes not just a geospatial location, but also historico-cultural locatedness. Internal GPS is not only a spatial orientation, but also a relationship with time. Vladislavić uses Lionel Abrahams’s notion of a “topsoil of memory” to describe this temporal sensitivity to history and culture: “Lionel Abrahams has written about the significance that certain stray corners of the city assume through personal association, places where we feel more alive and more at home because a ‘topsoil of memory’ has been allowed to form there” (*Portrait with Keys* 188). This “topsoil of memory” is partly the “mnemonic” (*Portrait with Keys* 31) that features in the cityscape prompt in the viewer/walker. Just like animals weave tracks through a landscape partly based on their memory of waterholes, easy going stretches, and so on, so do we find our way in the city. Hence, memory may also involve “collective” or “prosthetic memory” (Landsberg) alongside personal memories. This might remind us of the “multidirectional memory” of memory studies in which memories can belong to both the physical and the social, the individual and the group (Rothberg). For Vladislavić, memory is not just his own, but that of others too, especially writers. In the writing of Poe, Baudelaire, Benjamin, Bosman, and many others, he found information that allowed him to make sense of city life. As he wrote in *Portrait with Keys*, “It is the privilege of writers that they are able to invent their memories and pass them on between the covers of a book, to make their memories ours” (187).

Evolving an internal GPS hence requires personal, historical, and cultural information, as well as somatic coordination. We might define internal GPS as a dynamic and evolving series of spatio-temporal coordinates and markers that allow a person to orient themselves. This orientation connects the geo-spatial with the psychological-temporal, creating a sense of home and belonging. Vladislavić explains that this connection between the human brain and place happens via metaphor, a linkage that writers are particularly practiced in:

Playing metaphoric games with the city and its parts is a serious pastime. Metaphor is a crucially transformative function of language. It creates equivalence and reveals connection. It is how we bind ourselves to places in the world and reconstruct them in our imaginations. (“Flow” *Ponte City* 8)

A proprioceptive sense alert to place and its history finds meaning through the interconnecting function of metaphor. This physical and imaginative practice of noticing the detail of a place and its history and finding appropriate metaphors for that place and time requires a degree of internal quiet and focused concentration. We might say that those with a high level of mental chatter are unlikely to be utilising their internal GPS. Vladislavić’s noticing requires mental quiet, full body perception, peripheral vision, and emotional openness. It is often actualised by walking, though not always. A critic on two legs, his insights are seldom pedestrian. He brings an artist’s appreciation for negative space, a monk’s silence, a poet’s inscription of time and texture, a postcolonial analysis of otherness to our living history, particularly as embodied in the materiality of our lives.

Where did Vladislavić’s internal GPS come from? Some of it is surely from his father’s engineering mind that sees how things fit and do not fit together. Moreover, he has the aesthete’s eye for detail of his mother. Further, he was a quiet and bookish child with strong powers of concentration, as indicated in *The Distance*. However, he has also trained himself to be a careful observer and some of this comes from being a stranger, an outsider. Vladislavić has made a virtue of immigrant alienation and lostness. His perception has been honed by constantly having to establish new perspectives. Despite being born and brought up in Pretoria, a move to Johannesburg from north of the Jukskei river is no mere relocation. Hailing from out of town, he has brought the fresh perception and the excitement of the immigrant to Johannesburg’s streets. Keen to understand his new locale he delves into the city’s history: the second hand, the redundant, rubbish, waste, the shadow side of modernity are all described in detail. The background becomes the foreground in Vladislavić’s work. We might say that he brings the city’s underground and surface together.

Vladislavić is able to write Johannesburg because he can read its streets. Walking becomes reading, which eventuates in writing. Literature’s ability to bring us close to our imaginations also promotes intimacy with those things that prompt our imaginations. Chief amongst those imagination stimulants is nature; a landscape, mist at dawn, the bustle of an ant colony, a lion’s roar at night; all of these activate our imaginations like little else. It is no surprise, then, that much of literary terminology has to do with nature and our interaction with it: point of view, vista, narrative trajectory, context, backdrop. Literature attempts

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to describe and convey place and space: much of its language is about spatial and social relationships. Vladislavić applies this language of deixis, of spatial arrangement, to the city.

The narrator of *Double Negative* is unable to read the moods of London as a visitor:

the moods of places are subtle; they can change from one step to another, as Benjamin once pointed out [Walter Benjamin *The Arcades Project* 88], ‘as though one had unexpectedly cleared a low step on a flight of stairs’ (I have the quote here on my notice board). I learned the basic English of the city, I followed the simple arguments of avenues and squares, especially when they were underlined by the river, but the things it was saying under its breath, the cryptic conversations of unfashionable neighbourhoods were always beyond me. (93)

Vladislavić is able to read not only the language of Joburg’s streets, but also its subtle moods, because he has gradually developed a sense of home and knows Johannesburg’s history and literature. Connecting physical emplacement to language and literature, he writes by contextualising the body. Vladislavić could be seen as a Romantic landscape artist who has turned his gaze to the linear constructions, bureaucratic procedures, shiny neophilia, and corroded textures of an industrialised cityscape. He gives the precise details of specific places: the lay of the land, landmarks, trees, rocks, road names, architectural features, industry, local argot, the habits of everyday life. His books are full of monuments, statues, public art, photographs, books, libraries, shops, mass produced stuff, junk, ephemera. In this respect he conducts a taxonomy of our behaviours and things, a history of the palimpsests of fashion. A crucial aspect of his art is that it is founded upon a refusal to separate nature from culture, organic growth from artificial human invention, the country from the city. He counts the devastating environmental cost of each word, every single brick, all the buildings, the city as a whole. The ecology of home is not always comfortable.

Hence, Vladislavić has been a flaneur in Johannesburg. The city is personified by the flaneur who turns place into person, echoing the Chicago School of urban sociology and ecology. One could argue that Vladislavić is, moreover, instrumental in the creation of an African flaneur. Flaneurism has a long history. The word “flâneur” described a young urban loafer at leisure to stroll and observe street life in Paris in the mid nineteenth century, usually without directly engaging others or working (Mazlish). The origins of this character lie in the intense appreciation of surroundings, usually natural, to be found in Romanticism, especially in the walking descriptions of Blake, Wordsworth, Keats. Charles Baudelaire revived this Romantic locodescription in the city, partly inspired by Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd”. In *The*

Painter of Modern Life, Baudelaire described the flaneur in Poe's story and then embodied him in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), a depiction politicised by Walter Benjamin in *The Writer of Modern Life* and *The Arcades Project*. However, it was not only Poe, Baudelaire, and Benjamin who wrote about the flaneur and the character appears in Dickens and then Eliot and other Modernists. Since then, the figure has proliferated, from a central protagonist in novels, to a concept in urban sociology and planning, to Guy Debord and Iain Sinclair's sychogeography, to "schizocartography" in Tina Richardson, to Rebecca Solnit's "faction", to a postmodern tourist (Borchard).

The African flaneur walks past Baudelaire's decadent sidewalk crawler (Walter Benjamin *The Writer of Modern Life*). He or she is no idle dandy with a turtle on a velvet leash. This walker must deal with the threat and adrenalin of Johannesburg and cannot stroll in a leisurely fashion. Not only is this figure seldom fully relaxed, but this African observer is mostly not wealthy enough to be a tourist in a consumerist paradise. This can be exaggerated into resentment by feelings of alienation, eventuating in paranoia and a siege mentality. Aubrey Tearle the focaliser of *The Restless Supermarket*, for one instance, is just such a crotchety conservative and no agent of awareness liberation, causing us to question Benjamin's optimistic model of the flaneur and his walks. The upside is that the African flaneur has an adrenalin-fuelled alertness that notices things. This pays off for a writer in detailed observation that allows a place and time to come to life. Indeed, we might say that Vladislavić's African flaneur is about consciousness.

This flaneur is white, challenging our sense of who the African flaneur could be. Kudzayi Ngara argues that "at an individual level, Vladislavić occupies a somewhat ambiguous or unstable space The ambiguity and instability stem in part from his 'whiteness' – which is itself a fluid category that cannot be applied as a blanket term – as well as his migrant roots" (7). Helene Strauss also suggests the slipperiness of such general terms as "black" and "white" in Vladislavić's work. This unstable racial ambiguity is visible in Vladislavić's white privilege, which can become white liability on the streets. Another instance might be the similarity between his flaneurs and Toloki, a black flaneur/psychopomp in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*, who could be even more dislocated. Teju Cole's black wanderer in New York in *Open City* also echoes Vladislavić's ambiguous flaneur.

Attuned to energy and liveliness whilst recording his impressions of the city life around him, this white African flaneur is also an eco-flaneur. He notices geography, geology, flora, and fauna in the city. This seems to be a quality of the African flaneur: Teju Cole's protagonist Julius notices trees, animals, and birds and their migrations in *Open City* (3–4, 58, 185). Human behaviour mirrors nature, even in New York, and Julius says of a tree of heaven (*Ailanthus Altissima*) that "botanists call it an

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invasive species. But aren't we all?" (178). Zakes Mda's whale caller is another flaneur of sorts with an intense appreciation of nature. These characters demonstrate the interpenetration of the city and ecology, doing away with a neat distinction between the urban and rural. We do not usually associate the flaneur with nature, but the origins of the figure are in Romantic locodescription and in Ivan Vladislavić the flaneur has a greening effect, reanimating that natural heritage in the postcolonial city. Vladislavić's writing is not in the first instance about nature, but nature is the constant background and his yardstick of evaluation.

This should not suggest that the African flaneur is automatically a positive and redemptive figure, however. It is equally possible for this character to not only be blind to nature, but also to instantiate various racisms, ethnocentrism, and regressive behaviours, as with Aubrey Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket*. Moreover, this character is not always at home, not always able to read his streets, let alone those of others; Vladislavić regularly pokes fun at the limitations of his characters, seldom if ever allowing them hero status. Vladislavić's flaneur is no ideal figure, but does have the potential to green the city via homing that involves an appreciation of nature.

Further, the African flaneur in Vladislavić is not necessarily always a walker. In *The Exploded View*, for example, we see that flaneurism can occur within the driven car in a city designed without concern for public transport. Despite an internal GPS rendered marginal by the high speed of driving, many penetrating observations of city life take place from behind the wheel in this novel.

Finally, Vladislavić's flaneur is also a cultured character in at least two senses. Firstly, he is a construct of the culture of flaneurism; a kind of contemporary composite of flaneuristic elements in the writing of Poe, Baudelaire, Benjamin, Dickens, Bosman, and others. Secondly, he is a cultured individual who reads. In both of these literary senses he brings culture to the city, which has the potential to transform it into a more human, a more liveable, place. This involves the layering of memory, but it also brings the memories of others in literature and literary history to bear on the postcolonial metropolis, creating what Nuttall and Mbembe call "the literary city" (*The Elusive Metropolis* 33), a city partially created and understood via literary-style reflexivity. In other words, greening should be understood as not only a practice, but a culture.

These affectionate deconstructions of flaneurism suggest not only an acutely self-reflexive author, not merely a creative and original writer, but also the fertility of bringing different contexts and traditions into propinquity.

Johannesburg is not an easy place in which to belong. Founded on mining, it retains a tough industrial character, concreted by a fascist history. A conundrum of walls and impermanence, deprivation and riches, this is a city that resists easy, comfortable meaning. Yet it is just this

very unhomeliness which resonates with other urban centres, for modernity has uprooted us all from planet earth.

Vladislavić's home accommodates a poignant sense of transience, loss, and of being lost. Joburg has been fluid from the start, with whole areas suddenly changing out of all recognition; as a result the city does not allow easy assimilation. Vladislavić has made a virtue of immigrant alienation and lostness, a virtue out of constantly having to establish new perspectives. This seems to be via the distance to observe, both critically and appreciatively, that straying from the beaten path gives. But it is also through the gentle redemption of South Africa's brutal pariah history granted by his consistent attention to the everyday. Vladislavić's lucid focus on the sun-baked texture of local living is his technique for managing the complexity, confusing profusion, and stark social striations of the place, if not making it uncomplicated. By focusing on the everyday experience of the individual, and particularly his own consciousness and humour, he has created a space of relative freedom beyond the city's irreconcilable contradictions.

Etymological Technique

Vladislavić explains that he did art at school, but dropped it around the same point that he decided not to do architecture. "At that time you were encouraged to do art if you were going to study architecture. But I always enjoyed drawing. When I was at university, my girlfriend was studying fine art and many of my friends were artists or involved in the art world. So that's really where my more serious interest in art came from – I wasn't exposed to much art as a kid. Over the years it's evolved into what I would say was my major interest, outside books." ("Inside the Toolbox" 120)

Vladislavić is a visual writer. The physical presence of words on the page is a natural calligraphic link to art and he says that art is "my major interest, outside books". Sean O'Toole argues that Vladislavić has turned art criticism to creative ends, repeatedly riffing off an idea or aspect of art in his fiction. He is poised between being a connoisseur, one of the cognoscenti, and characteristically displaying "circumspection and ironic reserve towards art" (O'Toole "Uncommon Criticism" 17). Art criticism, physical sensibility, ekphrasis are combined in his work, offering imaginative readers clear imagery.

This combination of words and images suggests Vladislavić's collage composition. In "Helena Shein", a piece that traces the evolution of his story "The Book Lover" in *Propaganda by Monuments*, he explains how he created his heroine by combining two different photographs that he found in a second hand book. This combination exemplifies playfulness in his writing, a willingness to allow his imagination free reign to knit

together apparent incompatibilities. A visual sense of the shape of words prompts a roaming imagination. He describes Willem Boshoff's artwork as a book writ large.

The viewer of Willem Boshoff's art is understood as a reader. Boshoff is a writer. Not only is much of his sculpture and installation centrally concerned with language and books, but he has also written concrete poetry and dictionaries, and extended commentaries on his own work and processes. The borders between these writings are porous and their meanings seep through and run together. (*Willem Boshoff* 6)

The last sentence seems to sum up Vladislavić's attitude towards words and images: the borders between them are porous and their meanings do seep through and run together in his practice. He allows words and pictures to cross-fertilise. Words on the page are, after all, calligraphic images. Words have often framed visual art, in the form of titles, captions, commentary, and reviews. Conversely, many of the best books have pictures in them. This was overtly signalled in 2004's *The Model Men*, which included Vladislavić's prose alongside Joachim Schönfeldt's embossed paintings and the commentary of Andries Oliphant. The catalogue names each "writer", "illustrator", "reader". Since then a number of cooperative projects with Willem Boshoff, David Goldblatt, Andries Fourie, David Southwood, and Lucia Ronchetti, amongst others have eventuated. Moreover, Vladislavić is ekphrastic on occasion – a mode of art in which other art forms are described, a way to establish connections between different kinds of art. Not that he is always describing real pictures; he sometimes invents what he describes. We see this in the three fictional Saul Auerbach photographs described in *Double Negative*, or the description of the mural of Alibia in *The Restless Supermarket*. He wants to experiment, play, create dialogue, pressurise boundaries. This sometimes means cooperating with other artists. In interview with Katie Kitamura, he has described how these ventures came about:

I've found these joint projects really valuable. It's an approach I was drawn into rather than something I theorized or thought through beforehand. It started with artists approaching me to write for their exhibition catalogues. There was a period when the art community got wise to the idea that you could make yourself a really snazzy catalogue by getting writers involved and giving them an open brief: "You don't have to write a critical essay, you could write a poem or just give me a story to put in my catalogue!" I was resistant because I didn't like the idea of being commissioned in that way. But then the approaches got more interesting. For

instance, I have a close friend, Joachim Schönfeldt, who is a Conceptual artist. He had a set of illustrations and he said to me, “These are the illustrations for a book that hasn’t been written yet. Are you going to do something about it?” (*laughter*) It was a kind of game. I think he would have been satisfied with a few extended captions or a short piece of prose, but I used his work, which interests me deeply, to produce a novel of sorts, which is *The Exploded View*. (Kitamura)

Vladislavić has described cooperation as “the bonded autonomy of a joint project” (“In Conversation: S.J. Naudé and Ivan Vladislavić”). In the 2017 Special Edition of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* devoted to Vladislavić and writing visual culture, Katie Reid and James Graham see Vladislavić as a communal artist who, via editing and cooperations (particularly with artists and visual art), has created a “community of practice” (Riach 93). If this is so, it is a broad community, as his cooperations extend from literary influences to the retuning of radio in *The Distance*. Nevertheless, Vladislavić is particularly interested in “conceptual art” and photography. Typically photographs, in *TJ* and “Dead Letter Gallery” in *101 Detectives*, do not illustrate the text, nor does the text explain the images. Rather, each stand separately, though related.

Hence his deconstruction of neat distinctions between words and pictures does not mean that he is a boundaryless creator. In fact, Vladislavić insists on the independence of his writing and will not collaborate with artists, only cooperating with them. This may seem like an arbitrary semantic distinction, but it is central to his sense of himself and his work. His writing is conducted autonomously. He will allow the work of other artists to influence him, but he will not write with them. He does not create with others directly; rather his writing is a free response to the work of others. This suggests resolute artistic integrity and autonomy. It is not only a matter of self-respect, it is also a way of respecting the creations of other artists. Not only are artists equal, but neither word nor image achieves preeminence. Democratic equivalence and mutual respect are the keywords. This is dramatised in a number of stories which debate the ethics of representation, as in a sculptor’s depiction of atrocity in “Curiouser” (*The Exploded View*). Vladislavić’s emphasis on autonomy suggests a process-orientated aestheticism in postcolonial fiction. It might be said that this aestheticism is dictated by “world literature”, which requires a certain taste to appeal to metropolitan markets. Nevertheless, his staunchly independent spirit appears to be a badge of pride. The narrator in *Double Negative* says that he does not want to speak for others, that he has “done enough ventriloquism as it is” (39).

This foregrounding of words via visuality locates Vladislavić amongst his peers. He turns to Donald Barthelme to explain this

technique: “His stories mimic the postures of the eyewitness account, the questionnaire, the interview, the sales pitch. By layering terms from a particular jargon or semantic field, and exploiting the ‘combinatorial agility of words’, Barthelme taps into the surprising energies locked up in the most superficial forms of language” (*The Loss Library* 33). Fond of anagrams, puns, quotation, lists, advertising ergot, political newspeak, journalese, Vladislavić plays with language, at times in the spirit of OuLiPo, the Workshop for Potential Literature founded in France in 1960 (*The Loss Library* 31; Kitamura), in order to release the “surprising energies” of words. Vladislavić is a formal innovator and experimenter. In this way, he is not dissimilar to the Latin American magical realists – particularly Borges, Cortázar, Márquez, and Vargas Llosa. There are also hints of the modernists and American minimalists in his work. Yet, again, he has created his own oeuvre: the post-apartheid “micro local” (S.J. Naude).

Vladislavić not only uses visual imagery, but also foregrounds the materiality of language. He is as interested in the calligraphic shapes of words as their sounds in lung, throat, palate. This is because he wants to describe things precisely, which means that he must move beyond words as generalisations and use them in specific ways. Part of the motivation for this is to find an English that conveys something of Johannesburg. Through an etymological technique of exposing the changing history, meanings, and porosity of words, Vladislavić can both use and move beyond their accepted meanings. Showing where the meaning of words comes from deconstructs the etymological fallacy of a single original meaning. As the outlines of words become hazy, they are foregrounded. Words are presences in this writing, not transparent windows onto reality. Vladislavić’s use of words might be said to be haptic, tangible. He is at pains to show how words are used to structure our perceptions of reality, and hence reality itself. These structurings reveal the interests involved in their deployment. As Stefan Helgesson puts it, Vladislavić “renders the medium of print visible” (778).

Notes and Collages

‘Play,’ according to Barthelme, ‘is one of the great possibilities of art’. The absence of play in a work of art is ‘the result of a lack of seriousness.’ (*The Loss Library* 33)

Probably as a reaction against the noise of our busy modern lives, there has been a reanimation of interest in minimalism, quiet, slowness, and introversion. The fascination of Buddhism and Zen, for instance, sparked during the 1960s in the West by the hippies and the writings of D.T. Suzuki amongst others, has returned as an antidote to the frenetic busyness of today’s media-saturated world. One recent instance would

be Susan Cain's *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (2013), but there are others such as Carl Honoré's *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* (2005) and Milan Kundera's *Slowness* (1996). Vladislavić is a minimalist author in the sense that he avoids drama, quietens his internal dialogue, and is quite methodical, so that his work has and encourages high powers of concentration. By slowing down his own mental chatter, he is relatively free to absorb sensations from the world around him, becoming an acute observer. This appears to be important for the post-colonial flaneur given how noisy modern urban living is. Teju Cole, for instance, has his flaneur narrator not only demonstrate interiority and attentive observation, but he seeks solace in an art gallery where he uses the word "silence" twice and "quiet" three times in one paragraph (*Open City* 38).

Nevertheless, Vladislavić may be a walker, but he is no somnambulant plodder, staying awake to innovation, the strange, the shocking, the unusual. Chance encounters are a delight to this author. He talks of "one of those lucky encounters that supports an affinity" ("Inside the Toolbox" 121). This liking for the unfamiliar and serendipity alongside connection and affinity suggests an openness. Vladislavić understands his writing practice as free association in a particularly revealing conversation with Andie Miller. As opposed to editing, fiction requires that he access "another space" which is "not conscious" and is "uncontrolled":

"The initial composition has to be an uncontrolled process to some extent, in my view, otherwise it's not creative. That's how fiction arises. It comes out in a way that's not conscious, otherwise it would be a different kind of writing. It has to be an open, imaginative form. Whereas editing is a conscious process. All writers do the two things, everybody writes the initial draft and then edits it, fixes it, changes things. It's just that editors do so in an incredibly single-minded and conscious and trained way. It develops a certain way of thinking. And to get from that very conscious editing mode to the open, less conscious and less controlled one is quite difficult. I've just had to learn to do it, or one side of my career would have been overwhelmed by the other. To edit, you have to look at the thing in a cold and conscious way, and engineer it. There's not a lot creative about it. It's a very technical process. Then to write fiction you have to get beyond that, you have to get into another space completely." ("Inside the Toolbox" 118–9)

Vladislavić relates his editing to left brain objective logic, whilst his fiction is "another space" of right brain intuition, an expression of the unconscious. Whilst it is clear that his creative process involves both, fiction begins with freedom and playfulness. Free play is emphasised in

“The Omniscope (Pat. Pending)” from *Propaganda by Monuments* in which the protagonist makes fun of critics keen to analyse the creative process:

People *will* ask me: How did you do it? Did you sketch it in advance? In pencil or pen? Felt-tip or fountain? In two elevations or three? What was the scale? Large or small? Did you cost it out on the back of a cigarette box? Filter or plain? What did it come to? Did you have a marketing strategy?

I tell them that I made it up as I went along. (71)

How does he achieve this open, free, unconscious spaciousness? The first part of his practice consists in his ability to access meditative mental quiet, enabling him to observe. Sometimes he achieves this lack of internal perturbation by walking, at other times by reading, or simply by being quiet. In other words, he grants himself the space to daydream.

Secondly, he is a compulsive note taker. In “X marks the Spot: An Essay” he clarifies this:

The habit of keeping a notebook preceded my reading of Dahl. It was first instilled in me as a teenager by a schoolteacher who encouraged me to write. His name was Gavin Wilmot. He gave those of us who showed some interest an exercise book – a “writer’s notebook”, he called it – in which we were free to set down any scrap of mawkish poetry or par-boiled philosophy that took our fancy, and he would read it and comment on it. Not for “marks”, the tyrannical currency of the syllabus, but for pleasure and curiosity. He was the first person who voluntarily read something I had written.

The note-taking habit has never left me. (125)

If daydreaming is the seed of Vladislavić’s writing, then noting those dreams down is the rooting stage. In *The Distance* he says that “It’s one of the principles: get the thing down on paper first. You can come back to the editing later” (103). That these notes are crucial is particularly apparent in *The Loss Library* and *Portrait with Keys* which are assemblages of notes, but throughout his oeuvre the fragment or paragraph is a recurrent structuring feature. This personal archive of notes is a crucial part of his writing, which also utilises key influences, of which more anon.

Dreaming and note-taking are not in themselves enough for fiction. Vladislavić goes on to explain that it is “the congruence or clash” between two elements that ignites fiction:

My notebooks contain every conceivable kind of material: chance observations, overheard remarks, news clippings, pamphlets handed out at traffic lights, headlines, phrases from menus, quotations from

novels, fragments of dreams, puns, titles for books that will never be written, etymologies, calendars, peculiar surnames from the obituary columns, and many other things. Yet these separate items in themselves never constitute the beginning of a fiction. Rather, it is in the congruence or clash between two of these elements or several of them together that the work begins. It is a reaction, obeying the laws of a chemistry I am unable to explain to myself or to you. (“X Marks the Spot” 126)

He insists that fiction is an inexplicable chemistry, suggesting that he is merely the laboratory in which the reaction occurs:

Never one thing. Always one thing and another.

Then the writing could begin ... the chemistry is intangible. We are dealing here with internal combustion. The artist is the laboratory, the experiment and the control. Even when his hands are turning the pages of his notebooks, there is nothing to hold on to. The work starts with an itch, an unease, something like indigestion or heartache, somewhere between the pit of the stomach and the back of the mind. (“X Marks the Spot” 128)

For Vladislavić, writing is “Never one thing. Always one thing and another”. A story starts as a tension, a discomfort. I like the emphasis upon the somatic here: fiction begins as “an itch, an unease”. Fiction involves conjunction and contradiction between two elements: a “congruence or clash between two of these elements or several of them together”. The spark of connection or contradiction is the propulsive energy that sets a story in motion. A couple of things seem worth noting here. Firstly, there is a certain serendipity in this conjunction of two or more things. Secondly, this dialectical relationship between things suggests that left brain logic and right brain intuition, fiction and editing, are not quite as contradictory as they may seem. The two poles of the apparent opposition may be interdependent, feed off each other. Fiction is friction and friendship.

As with observation, peace and quiet is the context in which this disease may be noticed. Like Wordsworth’s “emotion recollected in tranquility” (307), Vladislavić reflects upon his experiences and notes, composing them, or allowing them to compose themselves, into narratives in the quiet. This often involves shutting himself off from outside stimulation:

“I write at my desk. I don’t like writing outside. I like to be enclosed, and often during the day if I’m doing my own work, I’ll close the curtains. Because you’re entering another world. I think it was

Coetzee who said that when you've been working on a novel for a long time, returning to it is like going back to another place. It's more like a place than a page." ("Inside the Toolbox" 119)

Vladislavić allows himself to daydream, demonstrating trust in and respect for what we often dismiss as mere wool-gathering. This is particularly apparent in the metaphor of scientist, laboratory, and experiment that he uses for the creative process, refusing the condescension modernity often displays towards the fluffy arts. As Neville Lister puts it in *Double Negative*, he crafts patiently, "hoping for a small, unlikely miracle" (146). An interesting aspect of Vladislavić as a writer is that he regards the process of creativity as mysterious, letting it stay that way ("Conversation with Geoff Dyer"). This playfulness gives his texts a certain looseness, a little freedom and spontaneity, that allows serendipity, the unusual, the ignored, the marginalised to become apparent. As the narrator in *The Loss Library* puts it:

An imperfect mechanism is often beautiful. There must be play in the mechanism for it to function properly: the perfectly tooled device, one whose components fitted together perfectly – by what measure? – would be rigidly immobile. It would seize up, it would not move. (97)

This spaciousness, this play, enables his characters to speak back to the author/creator god, but also grants freedom to the reader who can have a more engaged, even inventive, reading experience than otherwise might be the case. His characters do not feel like mere friends of his ego; Aubrey Tearle, for instance, is someone obnoxious to Vladislavić in many ways. Having said this, however, he fully recognises that all fictional characters are just that – creations of the author. As he says, "in the end, real people are nearly always harder to like than fictional characters" (*The Loss Library* 30).

In line with his emphasis upon the physical, an important aspect of achieving this degree of freedom allowing access to a "parallel existence" is that he writes by hand:

"I write by hand, for a couple of reasons. Partly it's because I started out writing by hand. I've tried once or twice to make the transition to writing directly onto the computer, but I seem to need a more physical sense of how the thing fits together. With short texts, I'll often spread them out. I do a lot of shifting around of the kind that you can do very easily on the computer, but I need to do it on the page There's this proliferation of alternatives, because the computer lets you put them all in – and take them out again if you can. Eventually, I can't get a physical sense of the proportions

of the story, or where things are in relation to one another. It's the difference between scrolling up and down, or actually spreading the pages out and getting a physical sense of the text. Without that I get lost, and lose my sense of the shape of it." ("Inside the Toolbox" 119)

Graham Riach argues that Vladislavić uses a collage technique. Collage maintains "a fruitful tension between unity and disunity While forming new wholes, each element maintains its particularity, and bears traces of where it has come from" (80). This can be seen as an intra- as well as inter-textual function. Themes are developed across his stories through a loose network of associations. *Missing Persons*, *The Folly*, and *Propaganda by Monuments* largely concern fascism and monumentalism, for instance. A number of stories echo each other across these collections. This network of allusions and echoes allows him to build up an impression, rather than only making statements. His fiction might be said to be exercises in atmosphere and feeling, as well as analysis and argument. As the reference to Barthelme's championing of play above indicates ("After Joyce" 10), Vladislavić is comfortable with a play of fragments; he does not irritably reach for conclusive closure.

This process of physical interaction between a writer and his context is explored in *The Distance*. Vladislavić has his fictive brother Branko make fun of his being "wedded to the ancient technologies" (125). Branko goes on to describe Vladislavić's note-taking and collage composition as ancient, but tidy:

But the place is pretty tidy, almost too tidy for my liking. He was always like this, keeping a grip. Orderly decrepitude. I used to say he was like the custodian of some provincial museum, sweeping the threadbare carpets, dusting the sagging shelves. (123)

A "custodian" of "orderly decrepitude", Vladislavić satirises artistic self-importance, suggesting the obsolescence of physical media, not to mention his own irrelevance. Nevertheless, the ancient haptic technology of hand, pen, paper, allows Vladislavić to explore his material physically, awakening muscle as well as brain memory. It also enforces a certain degree of visceral discipline and slowness to his writing, encouraging reflection and meditation. Vladislavić achieves both physical and psychological intimacy via his note-taking and collage techniques, confirming his love of the physical archive.

Increasingly, however, Vladislavić has turned away from this physical collaging and his composition now mostly takes place in the computer. Perhaps Vladislavić has grown more comfortable with the computer over time, such that he is able to keep more of the story in his mind at once

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and so can compose on-screen? Nevertheless, writing remains a visceral activity for Vladislavić. There is kinesthetic craft in his painstaking drafting and redrafting, a refusal of the haste of quick-fixes. One can sense how his stories evolve in their own time via this patient methodology. Laying them out is how his narratives compose themselves. This writing places historical context, as well as the body, on the page. As Graham Riach puts it, “Vladislavić’s use of collage asks the reader to be aware of the dissonance between unification and fragmentation; in adopting and adapting this technique, he has made his text depict formally the challenges of reconstruction facing a transitional South Africa” (86).

The Distance also suggests that the origin of Vladislavić’s note-taking was not only his teacher, but his mother. He fictionalises her as a compulsive smoker, knitter, and collector, who has “three or four note-books with black covers and red spines and they contained nearly all the LM hit parades from the last five years, listed by artist, song and position on the chart” (115). She also has a black notebook in which she records her dreams, specifically the nightmares that plagued her early motherhood. The protagonist is aghast to see her burning the “dream book” on the braai:

I had always thought the dream book was intended for me, that it was an inheritance of some kind. One day, not when she died but when I grew up perhaps, when I was old enough to understand, the book would be given to me and its meaning would be revealed. But it would not keep. I understood that she had to burn the book and that I could do nothing to stop her. (118)

Vladislavić associates writing with the subconscious, the dark realm of dream. There is a long history of the subconscious in literature, ranging from mystical and religious texts to Romanticism, Surrealism, Postmodernism, not to mention psychoanalytic literary analysis, which reads texts as manifestations of the author’s unconscious. Creativity can spring from the porosity of boundaries in this twilight world of archetype, metaphor, and tangent. Neuroticism can also arise as the subconscious is potentially dangerous, given how much lurks there. According to Branko, his writerly brother is obsessive and superstitious: “He has a phobia about writing in public, thinks it’s unseemly and unlucky” (119), and “He’s always been fanatical about one thing: no one can read a line of the book he’s working on until it’s published” (29). Perhaps this neurosis lies in the vulnerability of a book. When his mother burns her dreambook, “in the ash of the pages, which looked like shards of pewter, I saw the bloodied spine trailing a nervous system of cotton thread” (*The Distance* 118). Vladislavić’s obsessive collection, collation, and perfectionism owes a lot to his mother it appears.

I think that what we see in Vladislavić is an author who renounces some authority in his emphasis upon fiction as an originally subconscious act. One might say that he allows the story to come to him by opening himself up as its channel. There is an appealing humility in this, particularly as trusting the subconscious may be risky. Nevertheless, this humility should not blind us to Vladislavić's native talent. Vladislavić is a born lexicophile who finds particular words for unusual, specific objects and events, for chance and happenstance. His mine-deep word-hoard is crafted with an etymologist's depth, a lexicographer's discrimination, a bibliophile's range. It includes, amongst many others, ideas of the monumental, urban exploration, critical nostalgia, the oblique, the marginal, rejectamenta, "tomasons", the second hand, DIY, minimalism, nominalism, the quiet movement, lostness. For me this linguistic talent is apparent in that he arrived almost fully formed as a writer in his first book *Missing Persons*. That he has been able to mine deeply the vein of interests and concerns in that first collection is testament not only to that talent, but also to some of his other skills. The dogged persistence of his patient honing of his craft, his editing proficiency, and his sheer commitment have become apparent as his vocation has unfolded. Surely these have played as important a role in his development as a writer as his creation of an African flaneur.

Editing

I'm allergic to drama. I can't go poking around in the pitiful contents of stranger's lives. Even the miraculous tales of endurance are too much for me. (*Double Negative* 161)

One aspect of Vladislavić's writing that stands out immediately is its formal perfection – there is not a comma out of place in this highly crafted writing. It should not surprise us that an author who is also a highly regarded editor should produce jewel-like faceted writing, every error cut out, each unnecessary word polished off. Vladislavić's calm and measured style surely also owes a great deal to his editing. Moreover, his emphasis upon the small and marginal probably comes as much from this patient editing as it does from his exquisitely attuned eye. Careful editing elicits specificity, conjuring concrete experiences from generalised words.

Edmund Burke would, therefore, have characterised Vladislavić's carefully edited work as "beautiful" rather than "sublime":

There is a wide difference between admiration and love. The sublime, which is the cause of the former, always dwells on great objects, and terrible; the latter on small ones, and pleasing; we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us; in one case we are forced, in the other we are flattered into compliance. (Burke 87)

Along with smallness and delicacy, Burke goes on to list smoothness and gradual variation as the primary features of beauty. According to these criteria, Vladislavić produces beautiful writing, partially because he seldom focuses on the whole at the expense of the part. Similarly, a Nietzsche would see Vladislavić's writing as Apollonian, ordered, controlled (*The Birth of Tragedy*). It is not that the carnivalesque is absent, but this could not, on the whole, be described as Dionysian fiction. Any writer of merit canvasses a variety of subjects, writes in a number of modes/registers, and cannot be confined in any simple way; nevertheless, Vladislavić's writing tends to be of the sober, as well as pruned, sort. His minimalism is far from the popular genres which thrive on the sensational (romance, crime, fantasy). In contemporary literature he is the other end of the spectrum from Irvine Welsh or Chuck Palahniuk.

Carefully crafted writing can run the risk of seeming merely pretty, unspontaneous, emotionally cool. Further, Vladislavić's focus on the specific may make his work appear "minor": small, local, unimportant. Indeed, it took decades for Vladislavić's fiction to be appreciated beyond Johannesburg. We might also characterise Vladislavić's fiction as a literature of repression – there is no sex in it. Moreover, there are few black people and women. Is Vladislavić a racist, as Sarah Nuttall has politely suggested (*Entanglement* 93)? Nuttall argues that the narrator in *Portrait with Keys* practices "avoidance" (*Entanglement* 92) of race issues, going on to wonder if this is true of his author. Does his editing involve avoiding and papering over unpalatable realities? We might ask more broadly if Vladislavić's aestheticism is decadent?

There is some truth to this, but I doubt it is a comprehensive assessment. As Sally-Ann Murray pointed out, Nuttall chooses to critique Vladislavić when she might easily have taken on a number of more obviously racially compromised writers, suggesting that she indulges in race baiting (140). My feeling is that Vladislavić does not avoid race, but his focus is on whiteness. He brings the conflation of race with class and history into sharp relief in his characterisations of Nieuwenhuizen, Tearle, Branko, for example. He seems to only explore blackness in a significant way in *The Distance*, but is this exploration more about the media than race and is it tokenism? Indeed, it is difficult to speak of whiteness without referring to blackness and vice versa. It seems that Vladislavić sticks fastidiously to the old creative writing course maxim "write about what you know" and this may be horizon of his fiction. Perhaps, like Coetzee, he is squeamish about speaking for the other? This raises the issue of representation. Should the literature represent its time and place? Must it be, can it be, an impartial recorder of the entirety of its context? To support such a view would be to suggest that realism is the only authentic option for literature. Vladislavić consistently challenges this realist assumption. Yes, we can dismiss his writing for not

conveying every viewpoint, but what would such an all-encompassing realism look like? Probably impossible, potentially bland.

My feeling is that Vladislavić is hardly a racist and his attacks on patriarchy belie any accusation of gender bias. Whatever we think of his race and gender politics, it is hard to deny that he consistently shows sympathy for the marginalised and poorest in South Africa. In “Flow” he appreciates the ingenuity of those pushed to the margins by the “clean up” for the 2010 Soccer World Cup. They “make improvements” (15) by repurposing the rocks designed to force them out of their overpass shelter as seats and a windbreak. He talks of the “inexplicably orderly” (51) street dweller stashes in stormwater drains in *Portrait with Keys*. In the same novel, the narrator praises the ingenuity and daring of thieves (38 & 137). As an immigrant of sorts himself, Vladislavić’s sensibilities are attuned to the plight of the poor, migrants, the isolated, the vulnerable. My feeling is that throughout his oeuvre and in line with his emphasis upon the subconscious Vladislavić does not edit out the grim aspects of South Africa and city life. He does, however, write of them with a light touch and he does not prioritise them above any other aspects, including everyday mundanity. Indeed, we can feed his practice back into the theory of minimalist aesthetics and conclude that here we have an aestheticism that is not merely pretty or bowdlerised. In other words, if this writing is not overtly politically confrontational, it is not merely decadent. Moreover, an assessment of aesthetics tends to be contextual. The cool, even aloof, contours and textures of this beautiful, Apollonian fiction are a rarity in the history of South African letters. Its restrained minimalism has had importance beyond aesthetic and curiosity value, however. Its refusal to indulge in sensation can be seen as part of an attempt on Vladislavić’s part to heal himself. Njabulo Ndebele diagnosed the weakness in South African fiction of the struggle era as the spectacular in his *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*. Whether opposing this or the sensationalism of contemporary literature, Vladislavić’s focus on the mundane and quiet has a restorative, calming effect. Apparently lacking affect in any strong sense, the emotional charge of his restraint is all the more powerful in its subtlety and longevity. Vladislavić’s writing makes even Coetzee’s minimalism appear narratively hyperbolic and sensational. Nevertheless, although largely lacking exciting event and character, it is precisely the extraordinary detail about the textures of everyday life in Vladislavić’s fiction that lends it purchase on the realm of affect. It is a brave artist who writes of the mundane and everyday, for they risk invisibility as well as obscurity and irrelevance. One might say that Vladislavić has shown dogged persistence in sticking to unspectacular fictions that resist the mechanisms of the marketplace. Moreover, the significance of his minimalism is that it is just as transporting as more maximalist forms, as Aldous Huxley suggested when he wrote:

Other things being equal (for nothing can make up for a lack of talent), the most transporting landscapes are, first, those which represent natural objects a very long way off, and, second, those which represent them at close range.

Distance lends enchantment to the view; but so does propinquity. (82)

Inappropriate Influences

Too much concern with precedence is a mark of immaturity.

Every writer belongs to one bastard bloodline or another, and laying claim to one can be a liberating lesson in perspective. But standing on the shoulders of giants is a skill that comes from long practice. When you start out, you are more likely to get under their feet. Don't be surprised if the giants – or their legitimate progeny – come stomping after you in the playground: 'We walk straight, so you better get out of the way!' (*The Loss Library* 45–6)

In the spirit of cooperation rather than collaboration, Vladislavić refuses ventriloquising and will foreground his influences when they are significant. These influences have their origins in the inappropriate, extending into the experimental. In interview with Peter Beilharz and Sian Supski, Vladislavić describes his writing as being interested in possibilities:

I was drawn as a young reader to books and writers that worked in an unconventional way. Quite early in my writing life, I became aware that there were all kinds of possibilities to be explored, ways of setting about the activity of writing that would take you into different territories, but that writers generally worked in quite a staid and convention-bound way. ("Ivan Vladislavić – A Tale in Two Cities" 27)

This experimental spirit which is aware of the conventions, and hence of the possibilities, of writing was partly inspired by his reading of Samuel Beckett as a teenager. His "inspired" high school English teacher, Gavin Wilmot, had recommended *Waiting for Godot* to him:

I remember that I read the play from cover to cover with a sort of exhilarated incomprehension. Every line seemed strange and provocative, gesturing towards something extremely important that I only half understood The small stage of the book was not a reflection of the world, but a world in itself, a place with its own marvellous rules Many other writers have recalled a youthful encounter with

an *inappropriate* book, sometimes with a film or play, an artwork that in one way or another was not meant for their eyes, and the profound effect this had on them. (“On First Looking Into Godot” 32–3)

The characteristic emphasis upon the “inappropriate”, the off-kilter, has led to openness, experimentalism, and innovation in Vladislavić’s writing. Perhaps the most important part of this experimental spirit is that it allows his imagination freedom to roam.

Beckett was a leading light in the minimalist movement, a movement named by philosopher Richard Wollheim in 1965. This movement is a modern version of ascetic stoicism, which saw *less* as the route to enlightenment and God. In our modern understanding this is not so much to do with purifying the body and mind to become a vessel for the divine, but because less tends not to blunt the senses. The popular phrase “less is more” came from the German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe who used it to describe his simple, functional architecture in the early 1900s. Literary minimalism included Beckett alongside Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, E.E. Cummings, and William Carlos Williams, amongst many others. Vladislavić’s minimalism not only owes a nod to these writers, but also to precursors like Robert Louis Stevenson. In the essay “A Note on Realism”, Stevenson argued that a successful writer should “suppress much and omit more” (*Essays in the Art of Writing* 111). Ernest Hemingway similarly practised “the principle of the iceberg” (Plimpton 26). In chapter sixteen of *Death in the Afternoon* he says “the reader ... will have a feeling of [what has been kept absent] as strongly as though the writer had stated [it]” (192). By cutting key elements of the story and its meaning, he was able to draw readers in because they became active in deciphering what lay below the surface. Thus minimalism tends to provide the pleasure of active reading. However, it also creates a certain unease because of its gaps and elisions. The reader seldom feels that they have fully grasped the story. As a form of excision, minimalism leaves stuff out. More self-reflexive versions of minimalism make the process of selection obvious; that which is left out is not hidden. I feel that this other of the text not only foregrounds the process of writing, typical in postmodernism, but also acts as a kind of absence that shadows or haunts the present. The left out becomes a ghost, if you will, that haunts the reality of the text, leading to melancholia. In Vladislavić this manifests as a certain wistfulness that accompanies his humour.

South African literature is no stranger to minimalism. Pringle’s poetry records his struggle to make relatively ornate English Romanticism convey something of the Cape. Schreiner’s proto-Modernist language in *The Story of an African Farm* was as sparse as the Karoo in which her novel was set. Tim Couzens argued in his introduction to *Mhudi* that Sol Plaatje had a “lucid and cutting style” (13). In the 1960s the journal

Ophir published concrete and minimalist poetry. J. M. Coetzee became a master of the shorn sentence, so that there is barely an unnecessary word in the whole of *Disgrace*, for instance. It does not seem too controversial to state that Vladislavić is at the apogee of this minimalist path in South African literature so far. He follows the South African tradition of paring English down, creating a spare, precise style. The hegemony of apartheid's big story also prompted Vladislavić to turn inward to the short story focused on the small and specific.

If Vladislavić's writing is minimalist, then it is at odds with the inclusive, sprawling, teeming magical realist novel characteristic of some postcolonial literature. *The Exploded View* is far from Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, or Okri's *The Famished Road*. Along with a number of recent tomes, from Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* to Don DeLillo's *Underworld* to Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, magical realism could be seen as the maximalist epic of globalisation. For every movement there is an accompanying counter-movement, however, and that is the concern of this book. Taking the fiction of Ivan Vladislavić as a case study, this book seeks to examine contemporary minimalism in its concern to establish a critical sense of home within migrancy, movement, and the global. Defamiliarisation is his *modus operandi*. This potentially not only neutralises the agon of homelessness, but also suggests how it may be possible to resist both the limitations of the local and the hegemony of the global. Vladislavić is certainly part of this minimalist refusal of proliferation, overstimulation, and haste. Yet, he is an uneasy bedfellow with minimalism as a lifestyle, as in Marie Kondo's "Konmari" method of cleaning, or the *Less is Now* Netflix series. His sense of minimalism seems too literary and political to be merely an individual lifestyle choice. Unlike the formalists and surrealists, he has not had to valorise defamiliarisation or artifice. South African reality offers more than enough strange, unsettling, even life-threatening, situations for wide-eyed realism to be bizarre enough for avant-garde tastes. Staying at home, being at home, Vladislavić might even invent a way of countering some of the history of homelessness in detailed descriptions of the everyday. This minimalism anticipates urban alienation, pandemic lockdown, maybe even apocalypse. Less is now less the high road to the divine and more the only route to survival, at least for our species.

None of this should suggest that Vladislavić is only influenced by the inappropriate or minimalist. Indeed, his literary influences are protean, including Dickens, Eliot, Kafka, Borges, Schulz, Barth, Barthelme, DeLillo, Auster, Kundera, Sebald, Breytenbach, Coetzee, amongst many others. His tastes in the realms of art and photography are similarly omnivorous. Finally, he wears his influences on his sleeve, naming them or episodes from their work in his own writing. Inspired by Beckett and others, Vladislavić has created his own form of light but rich minimalism.

Affectionate Satire

“It’s a commonplace about South African culture, one of those true commonplaces, that people find humour in the bleakest situations, that they laugh in the face of dreadful adversity. Laughter is a powerful thing. So much of the misery in the world is caused by people who take themselves too seriously. Diverse societies are necessarily full of incongruity and oddness, and laughter is the appropriate, positive response.” (Interview with Peter Beilharz and Sian Supski “Ivan Vladislavić – A Tale in Two Cities” 27)

Vladislavić is a funny writer. Without his humourous disposition, the minimalism in his writing might tend to the sad rather than the merely melancholy. What kind of humour do we see in his texts? No type of comedy seems to be excluded, but satire is primary and whilst it is dark it is also affectionate.

The form of humour most commonly utilised to expose and lampoon social and political targets is satire. Satire is a politically pointed form of humour described by Milan Kundera as “a thesis art; sure of its own truth, it ridicules what it determines to combat” (*Testaments Betrayed* 202). Its key technique is probably exaggeration, but its comedic arsenal is deep. Satire’s political force is evident in a tradition of mockery stretching back at least as far as the classical era. Within Greece and Rome, Aristophanes’ personal attacks contrasted with Menippean satire, which was more carnivalesque and focused on general attitudes. Within the English canon the Augustan satirists Dryden and Pope could similarly be contrasted with Swift, Byron, and Orwell. Latterly, wild Menippean satire flourished in postmodernism. Postcolonial writers have used satire of all hues to poke bitter fun at kleptocracies and the antics of megalomaniacs in contexts where they risk arrest and worse for speaking out. Vladislavić is also in the good company of South Africa’s tradition of subversive humour, which perhaps begins with Herman Charles Bosman. Plomer noted of Bosman that

He seems to have been fortified through-out his life by a sardonic humour, of a kind which often shows itself among South Africans who have not wholly succumbed to such local weaknesses as suburban self-complacency, political obsessions, or sport-worship. Humane, fanciful, ironical, antinomian, their humour helps to warm and protect them – and those who know them – against the world’s coldness or folly That playful irony of Bosman’s, that sly, mocking humourous Afrikaner intelligence, was seldom dormant. In his stories we see how it punctures pretentiousness and notices the little humbugs and evasions and speculations that go among ordinary sober respectable citizens. (Plomer “Foreword” *Unto Dust* 8 & 10)

Not confined to writers, this ludic line is visible in a number of other South African artists, including Walter Batiss, Norman Catherine, and Willem Boshoff, who attempted to oppose the monumental heaviness of apartheid culture. This culminated in the celebratory mood of the 1990s in the country and Vladislavić's satire found happy bedfellows in the relatively light-hearted writing of Zakes Mda and Niq Mhlongo, for instance, not to mention the vogue for stand-up comedy and satirical TV shows. Could we talk about a South African darkly satirical tradition as encouraging some refusal of prevailing context and norm?

Satire in Vladislavić's case seems to have been initially a way to survive history. Making fun of apartheid's many absurdities was a way to endure its darkest days. From the reader's perspective, the monumental erections of fascism were greenhouses for Vladislavić's early growth. The idealist and technicist formulations of democracy were rich compost for his flowering. The manifold differences between the various cultures of the "rainbow nation" continue to offer opportunities for humour. Perhaps this is true of many postcolonial nations split between archaic traditions and hypermodernities.

In trying to understand Vladislavić's satire, it is important to keep squarely in mind that Vladislavić has always been a socially and politically trenchant commentator. He writes of the "act of resistance" (71) and "the principle of resistance" (147) in *Propaganda by Monuments*, a principle that he has followed throughout his writings. His target is monumentalism, any wielding of brute power. By the same token, he invariably supports the little guy, the marginalised, poor, downtrodden. However, his following of this "principle" is neither slavish, simplistic, nor reactionary. He tends to approach social and political issues crabwise. In "The Cold Storage Club" in *The Loss Library* Vladislavić writes of art that "commemorates the small, oblique acts of resistance to power that people make in their everyday lives" (95). This is as good a summation of his work as any. His satirical outlook, coupled with his appreciation for the minor, results in a particular political obliquity. Resistance for him is just that: friction. It is seldom upfront, belligerent, armed. Instead, it attempts to embody its ideal of peace with a smile on its face. Vladislavić states his attitude towards politics in interview with Christopher Warnes:

"Political issues are not peripheral to my life, but having spent a lot of my editing career working with overtly political writing, my inclination is to shy away from the obvious, to be slightly obscure or tangential. At the same time I think that writing politically, dealing with questions of politics and power, is almost inevitable in this country Writing about the obvious images isn't the problem: it's being able to write about them in an interesting, fresh way." (275 & 278)

Resistance raises the question of art's ability, or otherwise, to initiate change. Theories of humour include Kant and Schopenhauer's incongruity (Carroll), Freud's clever short-cut that results in relief (*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*), Bakhtin's carnival (*Rabelais and His World*), Bergson's theory of humour as flexibility, neuroscience's emphasis upon social play (Weems), dark humour as a coping mechanism (Üngör & Verkeke), and latterly postcolonialism's strategic sociopolitical commentary (Reichl & Stein, Moss). Vladislavić seems to blend these aspects of the humorous. His humour ranges from the fun made of the curmudgeonly Aubrey Tearle, to the sharp satire of state fascism in "We Came to the Monument", to the herd mentality of "101 Detectives". At times one feels that Vladislavić's satire has so many targets, fires in so many directions, that one does not know what he is in favour of. There are, however, some consistent targets: fascism, mindless bureaucracy, patriarchy, linguistic insensitivity, cultural clichés, haste, greed. This multiple approach exposes what we take seriously. It could be argued that his writing encourages us to question easy distinctions, including those between the jocular and the momentous, the aesthetic and the political, the psychological and the social. The comical is often frivolous, but as Felicity Wood points out, "paradoxically ... it is the apparently airy, insignificant nature of the ludic that gives it its particular weight and potency, enabling it to act upon the reality within which it is situated" ("Taking Fun Seriously" 34). A world with deep seriousness at its centre, politics, tends to be destabilised by humour. Psychological, emotional, epistemological, symbolic, and lexical resistances and innovations may be as important as overtly social interventions in this view. The implication of this wide-angle perspective is that no sustainable change is possible without multi-levelled renovation. Readers, if they are not to reject this literature outright, must reconceptualise the traditional requirement that South African literature must be earnestly politically and socially committed in order to be taken seriously. Vladislavić's oblique angle on what we usually regard as "the political" encourages new perspectives and understandings. Play is not always irresponsible. It may help to heal trauma, as suggested in recent work on healing South Africa's colonial and racist heritage (Mengel & Borzaga, Gobodo-Madikizela). Humour may be one appropriate response to a long history and a broad system.

All that is playful is not necessarily fun though. As Kundera argues, ironic humour often irritates and frustrates the reader because it exposes ambiguities as well as attacking certainties (*Testaments Betrayed* 5). Perhaps the ultimate example of reader frustration in recent times has been the fatwah against Salman Rushdie, which demonstrated not only the tension between East and West, tradition and modernity, people of the one book and people of many books, but also the potential political impact of parody. This *fraças* exposed the nervous fault lines of both the postcolony and corporate globalisation: rebarbative fundamentalism and opportunistic expediency, respectively. Moreover,

humour might be regarded as insufficiently serious for a topic like South Africa and its past; it could be a frivolous distraction from that which needs earnest attention.

Humour can be politically trenchant, even iconoclastic, but it can also act as a safety-valve that defuses oppositional energy. Apart from this question about the political utility of satire, it is also the case that comedy is in the eye of the beholder. Satire can be reactionary and insensitive, especially in the prickly zone of intercultural interaction where sensitivities are high and misunderstandings are easy and many. Sometimes humour is not only inconsiderate, but also just plain cruel and nasty, fuelled by vengeful resentment. Satire may be a form of galling via straw targeting. Anything outside the narrow radius of its dim light is automatically ridiculed. Hence satire is not always funny. The satirist is faced with the aesthetic problem of how to avoid writing a laboured and predictable piece that adheres to a formula, a particular political opposition, a sustained tone of deprecating cynicism. Comedians can easily lose their ludic purpose when they appear to rant or carp, for humour relies on timing and surprise. Few jokes bear retelling; their stock in trade is a lightning-quick epiphany that cannot be recaptured. Short, sharp, pithy is the stuff of funny. This is part of the reason why humour is so difficult to write about. What is more dull and unamusing than explaining a joke? You either get it or you do not. Satire is a tricky art and can fall into the trap of reaction if it does not maintain a delicate balance between anger and compassion.

Does Vladislavić manage to maintain this balance? I think that Vladislavić learnt from Dickens that if humour has a social purpose then it can move beyond both frivolity and malice. He points out in *The Distance* that humour is often at the expense of others:

I'd been taught at home that pulling the chair out from under someone was not funny. It was close to the top of the list of things that a certain class of person thinks are funny but are actually dangerous, like stirring Brooklax into someone's coffee or jumping out from behind a door and shouting Boo! The victim might die of dehydration or heart failure. A person who has a chair pulled out from under them might break their back and be paralysed for life. (31)

Rather than sadistic slapstick, satire of monumental pretensions and power is Vladislavić's droll mode. This satire comes off as relatively gentle rather than angry. His tone is more often a wry smile than a belly laugh. In not overplaying his hand, he assumes that the reader can work it out for themselves, giving the reader some autonomy. We could call his humour affectionate satire.

Moreover, humour has an older meaning. To humour someone (verb) means to accommodate, indulge, or tolerate their humour (noun), their

temperament, their disposition, their character. Humour as identification and toleration of idiosyncracies and peccadillos seems to have its origins in the four humours, or four temperaments, of Greek medicine: sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic (*OED*). What then is Vladislavić's humour? Surely he is easy-going in character, and his writing is similarly light-hearted, which is not to say that it is without depth or toughness. A wide range of difficult feelings is quite typical of Vladislavić's oeuvre. These strange feelings include, amongst others, the anxiety of white obsolescence, the excitement of black aspiration, achromatic contentments, the secret life of objects, the sepulchral quality of that which is left behind in the scramble for the new, unfelt feelings crowding at the corners of consciousness. Perhaps pre-eminent amongst these feelings is the heritage of traumatic violence from apartheid, and the resentment arising therefrom. Another key set of feelings is guilt or shame, especially white guilt. Writing of such strong feelings with a light-hearted humour has some redemptive effect.

In South Africa, often a deadly serious place, humour is vital. Laughter, like a yawn, is infectious, and thus a force for social good. Humour as a disposition suggests that it has a physical aspect. The body quakes with laughter; entrapping demons of stasis are pushed out by the physical convulsions in the belly. Laughter is the best medicine because a positive disposition requires some distance on the self; laughing at ourselves is usually a sign of health. Thus it is that humour is one of the best critiques of society: in satirising the dismal, a good humourist physically embodies the alternative of happiness. The importance of this, particularly in relation to South Africa and its art, should not be underestimated. In a country with such a dark past and such a riven present, humour might be nothing short of revolutionary. Whatever social commentary might occur or otherwise, Vladislavić's delicacy is an important contribution to South African letters which have, understandably, tended towards the heavy and earnest in tone. Just as he has broadened our conception of the political, so has he brought some gravitas to humour and we cannot dismiss it as mere light entertainment.

Hence this book might as well have been titled *Moving Target: The Ongoing Relevance of Satire*. Vladislavić's oeuvre suggests that satire is a wider form than we might think. Since the satire of apartheid of his early books, Vladislavić's arrows have found ready targets in the post-apartheid regimes, machismo, and consumerist culture that accompanied South Africa's entry into the global market. His satires of the absurdities of apartheid required little tweaking in the new South Africa which provided similar fodder for his humour. Put another way, we might say that demographic changes did not entirely change the machinery of power in South Africa, so all that Vladislavić had to do was to keep his sights set on bureaucracy. This raises general questions about humour and its usefulness. It also raises the question of how to define postcolonial humour.

34 *Introduction*

Vladislavić's writing suggests that affectionate satire might be a good way to begin this definition. Vladislavić fights tyranny with irony, frivolity, and charm. Satire is his cheerful, suave, revenge on history.



Figure 00b.1 Blenheim Street (courtesy of Minky Schlesinger).



Figure 00b.2 Blenheim Street (courtesy of Minky Schlesinger).



Figure 00b.3 Ivan and Minky at home (courtesy of Minky Schlesinger).



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