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# Taking Fun Seriously: The Potency of Play in Ivan Vladislavic's Short Stories

Felicity Wood

Ivan Vladislavic's South Africa is a fluid, unstable place of sudden inversions or dissolutions, startling fusions or metamorphoses and hilarious, fanciful or downright crazy interventions. Anything goes in his world: in various tales from his short story collection *Missing Persons* (1989) two characters travel down Ben Schoeman highway in a motorised rocking chair, a pair of hands bursts into flames, a Prime Minister is pulled out of a television set and (drastically reduced in size) is kept in a cage and in 'The Tuba' in *Propaganda by Monuments* (1996) a Black Salvation Army Band overcomes a white right-winger who attempts to disrupt them, bearing him off in their midst.

For the most part, Vladislavic's fiction is set in the South Africa of the 1980s and 1990s, a shifting, changing period marked by increasing socio-political upheaval and transition.<sup>1</sup> The dramatic nature of the socio-political context with which it engages and the fact that it deals with recognisable South African historical figures and events has led many critics to ascribe highly specific socio-political purposes to Vladislavic's fiction. Andries Oliphant, for instance, describes 'When My Hands Burst into Flames' as containing, as its social subtext, 'the horrific public burning of people in recent times' (1990: 4). Marlene van Niekerk sees 'We Came to the Monument' as depicting, in allegorical terms, the actions and the ideology of the pioneers (1990: 15). Ina Grabe views *The Folly* (1993), through its depiction of the 'squatter', Niewenhuizen, as an exploration of the condition of the homeless (1995: 35). These critical analyses all seem to imply that Vladislavic should be viewed in more or less the same terms as any South African realist writer. Their one-to-one correlations between his work and aspects of the country's situation suggest that they feel that, essentially, his writing reflects political and historical realities - albeit in the shadowy, distorted mirror of the fantastic.

Yet Jack Kearney takes a completely different critical tack, declaring in a review of *The Folly*, that 'his neat labels and reputable categories begin to wilt and crumple'. The novel, he continues, 'seem[s] spirited and independent enough to interrogate me, rather than the other way around' (1994: 91). As Kearney's response suggests, any interpretation that attempts to pin Vladislavic's work down to the expression of one particular, straightforwardly serious message about contemporary South African society is likely to fall short. Indeed, it misses the point that we encounter a number of very different literary approaches, discourses and perspectives in his writing. These give rise to what Michel Foucault terms a heterotopia, a clash between worlds that are mutually exclusive: 'In such a state, things are "laid", "placed", "arranged" in sites

so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all' (1970: xviii).

This heterotopic quality arises from the fact that above all, Vladislavic is a deeply playful writer. His work is infused by a sense of unbridled glee in imaginative possibilities, and his pleasure in playing games - with words, characters, ideas and his readers - is the essential impulse behind his use of the fantastic elements in his texts.

For a start, as Sue Marais points out, when we consider the nature of the short story cycle, with its dichotomy between unity and variety, connectedness and dissociation, we encounter one such example of the game-playing with which Vladislavic's short story collections are permeated (1992: 41-43). On one level, his tales tantalise us with potential glimpses of connections and unified interpretative possibilities, yet they ultimately dissolve into diversity and discontinuity, eluding our attempts to bring any single, definitive critical response to bear on them.

Marais observes that the impetus towards unity in the short story cycle (1991: 176; 1992: 41) is suggested by devices such as a 'pervasive tone or mood', a 'fixed or limited set of characters' - or the reappearance of similar types of characters - a specific geographical location, as well as recurrent themes and motifs, which acquire a deeper significance in the context of the collection as a whole (1992: 42). These similarities are intimated, firstly, by the strange and unique nature of the world of Vladislavic's tales: a zany, bewildering realm, which is in part the South Africa we know, and also a surreal, disorderly landscape of the mind, inhabited, more often than not, by isolated eccentrics, in the grip of bizarre obsessions or suddenly infused with peculiar powers. Moreover, as Marais remarks in her analysis of *Missing Persons*, certain figures and motifs recur: the Prime Minister, the malevolent Granny, the compost heap, the impressionable, put-upon child-narrator. Then there are the 'webs of allusions': repeated references to monuments, statues and stone; partial, fractured memories or 'flashbacks'; frozen, motionless figures - either statues, plastic figurines or protagonists trapped in physical and psychic inertia (1992: 51-54).

Yet, while these appear to hint at possible links between different tales, and through that, some form of underlying coherence, ultimately Vladislavic's stories slip from our grasp. Evading ready assimilation and categorisation, they leave us in a shadowy, fragmented world, with unpredictable twists and turns that defy certainty and containment.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the macabre comic touches and the wacky surrealism of specific images, events or descriptions in individual tales stand out, as quirky, preposterous presences, subverting any sense of homogeneity and defying straightforward interpretation, bringing sheer delight in the uncontainable ludic possibilities of the imagination to the fore.

Despite the way she emphasises Vladislavic's reworking of the traditional short story cycle, Marais focusses closely on the apparent links and similarities between various groups of stories in *Missing Persons*, at the expense of the far stronger tendency towards dislocation and disruption that lies at the heart of Vladislavic's texts. It is possible that some of the apparent connections between the tales are artfully

laid traps awaiting potential readers and critics attempting to offer unified, conclusive interpretations of Vladislavic's work. Although Marais cites Alf Wannenburg's observation that in the country of Vladislavic's imagination, 'the signposts are frequently ambiguous, the intention elusive' (1992: 46), she nonetheless spends a great deal of time searching for signposts in her analysis of the latter's fiction.

'The Box' provides a particularly striking example of the limitations of orderly, rational interpretations in the light of the freewheeling imaginative antics in Vladislavic's work. After the Prime Minister is hauled out of the television set, the following events take place:

The Prime Minister began to struggle, kicking and punching at the air. Quentin smiled and rocked him back and forth.

'Please, Quentin,' Mary said, tugging at his sleeve.

'All right then. What do you think we should do with him?'

'We could keep him...'

'*Keep* him!'

'My mother has a printer's tray full of little things that would be perfect for him: beermugs, teacups –'

...

The first meal Mary gave the Prime Minister consisted of a morsel of mashed potato, a sliver of steak, and a pea, all carefully laid out in the lid of a milk bottle. The Prime Minister took one look at it and threw it in a corner. The whole of the next day he refused to eat. On the following morning he ate some oats and a raisin, and banged his plate against the bars for more.

That night Mary got up for some water and heard a strange squeaking sound coming from the kitchen. Going quietly nearer she saw the Prime Minister, stripped to his underpants and with his tie knotted around his head, jogging on the treadmill. (48-49)

The story was published during the 1980s, when South Africans were confronted nightly with the image of P.W. Botha haranguing them from their television screens. This extract could therefore easily be viewed primarily as a satirical response to a specific socio-political context. Its subversion of political authority is all too evident: the Prime Minister is reduced to the status of a pet hamster. As is invariably the case in Vladislavic's fiction, established systems of power and representatives of political systems are cut down to size and ridiculed in 'The Box'.

The passage is more complex than this, however. To read it purely as the undermining of a leading representative of an oppressive system would be to ignore the fact that the Prime Minister is a far more sympathetic figure than Quentin, whose vindictive, sadistic nature is suggested in the way in which he relishes tormenting the former. We also see later on that the Prime Minister has a supportive, loving relationship with his wife, in contrast with the coldness and lack of concern that exists between Quentin and Mary. Like Quentin, the latter is not a character that a reader would choose to identify with. Her loneliness is evident from early in the story, and

her eagerness to keep the Prime Minister, whom she feels is 'cute' (48) and incarcerate him in a cage is both pathetic and alarming. The ornaments from the printer's tray that she envisages serving his food on and the little meals that she prepares for him make her seem like a small child playing at tea parties with her dolls, indicative of the extent to which she has cut herself off from the reality of her situation. Through the feeble protests that she occasionally ventures and her attempts to care for the Prime Minister, Mary embodies the ineffectualness of liberalism in a society impervious to appeals to liberal values. Like many other proponents of liberalism, she retreats into an unrealistic little world of her own, while remaining complicit in an unjust system.

However, all the above reading offers in the end is another one-to-one interpretation of the extract. Neither of these analyses of the passage do it full justice, for they leave out the picture of the Prime Minister as a disgruntled domestic pet, energetically trundling away on a hamster wheel. This cannot simply be regarded as a means to a specific end, but it exists in its own right, as a marvellously zany image and it has as its impetus a profound sense of delight in the transformative potential of the fantastic. 'The Box' exists, importantly, on the level of a fancifully ludic flight of the imagination that begins with the image of a six-inch high Prime Minister being dragged out of a television set and kept in a cage. The extract playfully pursues the possibilities this idea raises.<sup>3</sup> In this way, it draws our attention to the connection between play and artistic creativity. In *Homo Ludens*, a study of the play-element in culture, Johan Huizinga makes the same point, citing how, in various languages, musical instruments are 'played' (1949: 42). Ursula K. Le Guin defines imagination as 'the free play of the mind' leading to the spontaneous 'recreation, re-creation, re-combination of what is known into what is new' (1989: 33) and this is a particularly apt description of the nature and effect of the imaginative play that takes place in a story such as 'The Box.'

This passage also brings to the fore the importance of play as an end in itself. One of the most distinctive features of this passage lies in the fact that it is highly enjoyable. Yet all too often, we tend to avoid including this aspect in our critical response. As Wendy Steiner reminds us in *The Scandal of Pleasure*, while 'I like' is at the heart of our criticism, our culture prefers to forget this (1995: 7). Roland Barthes asserts that *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) arose from a desire to 'un-repress' the idea of pleasure, as a reaction to the intellectual language of the day, which seemed to be 'submitting all too easily to moralising imperatives that eliminated all notion of enjoyment, of bliss' (1985: 205). On a fictional level, Vladislavic's use of the fantastic in stories such as 'The Box' seeks to accomplish something similar within the South African literary context, by inviting us to relish the lively, capricious imaginative revelry that lies at the heart of the tale. There are many similar examples throughout Vladislavic's stories: such as the ridiculous quest that the narrator and his Granny embark on in 'Tsafendas's Diary' in *Missing Persons*. Whizzing down Ben Schoeman highway in a motorised rocking chair, 'they narrowly avoid a collision

with a Mercedes Benz' (93). In 'Autopsy' in *Propaganda by Monuments*, Elvis materialises in Hillbrow, strolling through bookshops and take-away joints, wearing a 'sunburst catsuit, doubling as thermal underwear' (43) to protect him from the highveld winter.

Just as Barthes's concept of *jouissance* appears especially meaningful in the light of the specific character of his intellectual climate, so the pleasure we obtain from Vladislavic's stories acquires a special potency as a result of the way in which the latter's imaginative play is rooted in a particular political context. For instance, 'The Box' would not give us so much delight if it did not represent such a satisfactory fantastical subversion of an especially loathed political figure. In addition, as a tool of government propaganda the television had particular meaning for South Africans in the 1980s; the notion of a TV set out of which political figures could be pulled is a highly appealing one. More broadly, this tale acquires particular force as a result of the sombre, threatening nature of the political backdrop against which it takes place. A novel such as Menan du Plessis's *A State of Fear* (1983) clearly captures the sense of tension, dread and despair experienced by many people during the 1980s. On the other hand, in 'The Box', the darkness of the South African situation and also the general tendency to gloom and sobriety in fiction in English makes Vladislavic's quirky, humorous episodes and images stand out all the more strikingly. Paradoxically, therefore, the lightness of the latter's fantastical comic touch in this passage arises and derives its impact from the heaviness of his political context.

Another such example takes place in 'The Prime Minister is Dead', which deals with a very typical white middle-class family's reaction to the assassination of their head of state. While a typical work of English-language fiction produced during apartheid might have been content with exposing the dictatorial nature of the latter's regime and the parochial mindset of the family, Vladislavic goes one better. He intimates all this in his tale, yet also emphasises the ghoulish glee with which the narrator's grandmother greets the news of the Prime Minister's murder, and turns the funeral procession, traditionally an occasion for a display of the power and dignity of the state, into pure theatre of the absurd. The truck towing the coffin breaks down, and the father of the family loads the Prime Minister onto his wheelbarrow, charges towards the grave and tips him in. Episodes such as this make it obvious that to focus on the political commentary in Vladislavic's work at the expense of its fantastical escapades overlooks some of the most significant features of his fiction.

The fact that Vladislavic's writing runs counter to established trends within South African English-language fiction during the apartheid era was not, he claims, the result of any conscious decision.

I think there was very little deliberate about it. ...The idea of deliberately adopting a style in order to demonstrate an alternative suggests a view of communication through writing that doesn't chime with my experience of the activity. For me, writing is about doing what must be done, what suggests itself, what arises during the process'. (Wood 2000: 6)

However, this is perhaps an instance when the tale, not the teller is to be trusted. Whatever Vladislavic may have to say in this regard, we cannot help but be struck by the contrast between his work and conventional, realistic South African fiction in English. Inevitably the lightness and vitality of the former makes a great deal of the latter appear even more leaden and lacklustre by comparison.<sup>4</sup>

Yet although play lies at the heart of the extract from 'the Box' and many other of Vladislavic's tales, we are made very aware that this activity is not always pure and wholesome. For Quentin, pleasure lies in the sadistic way in which he toys with the Prime Minister and later on, the other unfortunate people that he hauls out of the television set. To an extent, we participate in the former's sadism in that we are entertained by some of the sufferings he inflicts on the Prime Minister. (For example, later in the story he pelts the latter with peanuts.) So our enjoyment is by no means entirely innocent. In part, Vladislavic's use of the ludic derives some of its vitality from its transgressiveness.<sup>5</sup> He entices us to delight in the play present in his work, while simultaneously reminding us that the latter can be cruel, and that we are sometimes drawn to it precisely for that reason. We could think, for instance, of the way in which a cat plays with a mouse, or the vindictive, hurtful games small children can engage in; and we are reminded that part of the fun of the carnival involved the ritual humiliation of others. Similarly, violence and sadism, albeit at a fantastically hyperbolic level, form an integral part of the revelry in Rabelais's work.

In short, as the Marquis de Sade and others have pointed out, pleasure has its nasty side.<sup>6</sup> While one tends to think of many South African writers in English during the apartheid era seeking to appeal to the finer aspects of human nature - such as the sense of moral outrage at the sufferings of others and the desire for a more equitable, harmonious society - the attraction of Vladislavic's stories in *Missing Persons* lies, in part, in the way in which he appeals to our taste for the more sinister aspects of life. This does, not of course, rule out the way the latter takes issue with some of the most destructive features of the South African experience during apartheid, but to focus on this aspect at the expense of the other qualities in his work would be to ignore the way in which his fiction is filled with cross-currents that tug us in a variety of very different directions.

One tale in which this is particularly apparent is 'the Terminal Bar.' The story depicts a group of white South Africans gathered at an airport, waiting to flee their country, bearing with them various trappings typifying their way of life, such as a Cadac Mini-Braai and a Kreepy Krauly. The latter, however, is accidentally 'killed' by a trigger-happy member of the group and its death agonies are described in detail. When we consider this incident, a number of interpretations immediately present themselves. The death throes of the Kreepy Krauly could, as Verna Brown argues, suggest the demise of white South Africa (1990: 129). The passage describing its death also serves as a comment on that society, providing a vivid image of the paranoia and random violence that characterises it and prefiguring the family murder carried out by Boshoff (a particularly thuggish member of the group) later on.

Moreover, the Kreepy Krauly is anthropomorphised and the fact that it displays greater emotional capacity than any of the human beings in the story is also a critique of the emotional life of the type of white South Africans - self-absorbed, aggressive and paranoid - depicted in 'The Terminal Bar'. On another level, the 'murder' of the Kreepy Krauly satirises commodity fetishisation. The special significance attached to this object by many white South Africans stems in part from the fact that it is a quintessentially South African product (it was invented in this country) and it serves as an indication of material prosperity (swimming pools being an essential feature of comfortable middle and upper class suburbia). But in the world of the story, everything that the Kreepy Krauly represents is lost or has been rendered meaningless, and the casual, almost off-hand way in which the object is destroyed symbolically indicates the precariousness of a sense of security and superiority based on a valorisation of material possessions.

Because this episode in 'The Terminal Bar' can readily be interpreted as exploring certain pressing social and political issues it could be argued that it dutifully conforms to the opinion expressed by various South African writers, critics and political and cultural authorities, most particularly during the 1980s, that South African literature produced under apartheid should situate itself within social and political realities. Yet this argument fails to take into consideration the way the passage sends itself up by the very ridiculousness of the event it describes. The name 'Kreepy Krauly', for instance, combines the trite with terminology redolent of a children's horror comic; and the object's long drawn-out death is described in terms that combine the farcical and the ghastly.

A further ambiguous aspect of this passage lies in the way in which it parodies death by violence. As in Rabelais, this is essentially non-realistic brutality. (The Kreepy Krauly is, after all, not really alive.) However, unlike Rabelais's tales, which are situated within an imaginary realm in which impossible physical recoveries take place, as when the first Catchpole bounces back completely after his terrible beating, this story is set in a realistically depicted South Africa, albeit at some point in the near future, inhabited by clearly recognisable types of people. The society in the story, in which violence is always close at hand and the innocent and the vulnerable (like the Kreepy Krauly and Boshoff's wife and child) are killed for no meaningful reason, is all too real. There is also the fact that while Vladislavic's episodes depicting cruelties and physical destruction have an immediacy and a strongly realised sense of bodily and emotional anguish they are cast in a comic mould. As a result, such scenes leave us feeling uneasy - and yet, they intrigue us for the same reason. Vladislavic comments on these kind of tensions and ambiguities that surround his use of the comic: 'Even when I write on the most serious subjects, I sometimes find the text cracking jokes despite me. I believe that some readers have also been moved to tears by my more humorous passages' (Wood 2000: 10).

In this, and various other stories in *Missing Persons*, such as 'Flashback Hotel' and 'Journal of a Wall', alienation and dislocation become the subject of grim

comedy. In its depiction of a disparate grouping of displaced characters, in a state of psychic as well as physical limbo, 'The Terminal Bar' suggests particularly clearly the effects of a separation from any kind of meaningful social order, emphasising the absurdities of this situation in the process. There are, for example, the peculiar assortment of objects valorised by the protagonists, the inappropriate nature of their reactions when violence erupts and the inanity of the verbal platitudes to which they resort in attempts to bestow some form of meaning or order on the situation in which they are caught. We feel little sympathy for these characters: they are simultaneously ludicrous and repellent in their apathy, self-absorption and misplaced sentimentality.

Ian Reid maintains that the sense of community that may be suggested by a common setting in the short story cycle is deceptive, for ultimately short story collections embody a 'dichotomy between a sense of community and regional identity and the alienation and solitariness of individuals' (1977: 47-48). Yet, while most of Vladislavic's stories in *Missing Persons* tend to have similar settings, there is no place for even a superficial sense of shared community and collective identity. As Marais remarks, in this regard Vladislavic's short stories represent a marked departure from earlier Southern African short story collections (such as those by Herman Charles Bosman, Pauline Smith and Bessie Head, for example). While such collections are anchored in a sense of communities and distinctive regional identities, Vladislavic offers us no such securities (13: 170).<sup>7</sup>

Like a number of the other stories in the collection, 'The Terminal Bar' makes us aware of the particularity of pleasure, for it is not a tale that all readers might enjoy equally.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, Vladislavic's fiction has a very specific type of appeal, for aspects of his writing that may delight one reader will not automatically have the same attraction for another. This is borne out by the radically contrasting ways in which different critics have responded to Vladislavic's work. Kaizer Nyatumba, for instance, finds 'Journal of a Wall' 'enchanting', while Oliphant views the tale as essentially sad and bleak, 'evok[ing] themes of social isolation and the desire for human contact' (1990: 8; 1990: 23). Tony Morphet describes the stories in *Missing Persons* as 'extraordinary' and 'exciting', yet Stephen Coan feels that the collection is unsatisfactory, complaining that, after finishing it, he was left with 'a sense of hunger - I was empty, I hadn't had enough' (1990: 8; 1990: 6).

In many respects, *Missing Persons* is a highly dark and disturbing collection. The weird, farcical juxtapositions that Vladislavic depicts and the demented antics of many of his characters are both funny and frightening, creating a claustrophobic, nightmarish world from which there is no escape. But when we turn to *Propaganda by Monuments*, which contains tales set in a post-1994 South Africa, we notice certain dramatic changes. In this volume, the outrageous scenarios and individual idiosyncrasies of Vladislavic's characters often have a creative, liberatory force. This sense of possibility is realised particularly through the carnivalesque, which, above all else, asserts delight as an essential human activity.

In certain tales in *Propaganda by Monuments*, we encounter striking images of the

victory of the carnivalesque over that which could restrain or negate it. Through this deeply liberated - and liberatory - vision, they present South African literature in English with possibilities that it has tended to ignore or deny. Further to this, the carnival, as we know, is a communal activity and, in contrast to *Missing Persons*, a sense of community is evident at various points. For example, the central protagonists in stories such as the title tale, 'Courage' and 'The WHITES ONLY Bench' are very aware of their community ties.<sup>9</sup> However, as we shall see, conventional notions of what it means to be a member of a community are playfully redefined. Boniface Khumalo in the title story has a highly idiosyncratic sense of the type of contribution that he could make to his community, while Kumbuzo in 'Courage', turns himself into a deeply respected representative of the black South African community as a whole, blithely disregarding the fact that in his own village he is regarded with dismay and disapproval.

A number of stories in *Propaganda by Monuments* are set in post-1994 South Africa. Notwithstanding this, they all avoid presenting us with idealistic pictures of a transformed nation. Perhaps this is most apparent in 'Courage', almost all of which takes place in an isolated rural village during 'the first days of our freedom' (114). An artist, Peter Meyerhold Becker, descends upon the community. Commissioned by the new government to construct a statue paying tribute to the people for their courage during the liberation struggle, he is seeking a model for his artwork. The person he eventually selects is Kumbuzo, a drunken, crippled reprobate. He subsequently departs, the 'new-found freedom [breaks] its promises' (135) and the community is engulfed by war. Nonetheless, the story has a surprising twist at the end. The narrator comes across the statue of courage in a town square and next to it Kumbuzo himself, who has transformed himself into 'the General', offering passers-by the opportunity to be photographed next to him and the statue.

Like the carnival, this conclusion holds out the possibility for hilarity in the face of loss and apparent defeat. Kumbuzo, a failure in his own community, recreates himself as 'a true hero of the people' (136), in the same way that the carnival enthrones the most insignificant, disreputable members of the community as rulers over its topsyturvy world 'for laughter's sake' (Bakhtin, 1984: 5). Such figures lack power in a socio-political sense, but they fulfil a crucial emotional and psychological role. They preside over those areas of human experience in which spontaneous mirth in creative comic revelry triumphs over the dreary weight of ordinary life, reminding us that the carnivalesque can - and, does, as a basic human necessity - take place in the midst of wretchedness and calamity. In a comparable way, the story is a triumph over those South African literary-critical dictates that insist on doleful solemnity when artistically conveying a situation of misery and disaster.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to 'Courage', in which political change brings nothing new to the protagonists, the title story in the collection takes as its theme the entrepreneurial opportunities opened up by post-apartheid South Africa. Boniface Khumalo, proprietor of the V.I. Lenin Bar and Grill - previously the Boniface Tavern - writes to

Moscow, requesting one of the many statues of Lenin, currently being dismantled all over the city, with which to decorate his establishment.

Below we have an extract from a letter from Christov, the government official who responds to Khumalo's request, which has been 'ruthlessly invaded and occupied by the translator' (37), Grekov:

It is with rather a great deal of pleasure that I pen this missive, reactionary to yours of the 5th inst.

Some weeks may have passed, indeed, as your request flew from subtropical Pretoria, administrative capital of the Republic of South Africa, to our correspondent temperate urbanity ...

I am instructed to inform you that your letter is receiving considerate attention at many and various levels, local and national/ international. Soon we will pen additional missives to impart the final decision-making process and details.

[Feeling overwhelmingly cocksure that your request re: SURPLUS STATUE will meet with a big okey-dokey fairly forthwith ...]

On a new thread. What is doing in the Transvaal? Do the cows and sheep graze on the veld nearby free from harm? Much has been said and supposed *vis-à-vis* socio-political machinations of reformism in your motherland of which I am always an amateur or eager beaver as they say. But the horse's mouth is what you are. Your tidings have captivated me boots and all. Please correspond. - Tr.]

We look forward to hearing from you in the near future. [And who knows how long hence we may eat beefsteaks and drink vodkas - our patriotic highball - in V.I. Lenin Bar & Grill of Atteridgeville!]. (29-30)

Like the traditional carnival, this passage makes the official world from which it arises a target of its gleeful parody. Christov's part of the letter constantly trips over its own feet, in its entanglements of tautology and bureaucratic jargon. Its unwieldy formalities are made to seem even more ridiculous when juxtaposed with the first sentence of Grekov's section of the missive, with its enthusiastic, inappropriate use of English colloquialisms. The letter as a whole effects a carnivalesque transformation, as the capricious vitality of Grekov's expression turns standardised formulas of conventional utterance into a prodigal display of the hilarious and the fanciful. Political processes become part of the comedy as 'reformism' is made synonymous with 'socio-political machinations', for example.

The ludicrous spelling mistake that turns South Africa into a 'Republic' is suggestive of the way the country in this passage becomes a place in and about which absurd fanciful possibilities run amok. Pretoria, traditionally perceived as the bastion of bureaucratic conservatism, becomes, in Russian eyes, a city characterised by its exotic subtropical nature, while the new South Africa is envisaged in terms of a rural idyll that appears particularly far-fetched when we contrast it with the derelict, decaying urban wasteland through which Khumalo wanders later in the story.

Appropriately then, Grekov ends his part of the letter expressing a desire that he and Khumalo may someday drink vodka together in the latter's establishment. His

wish may seem ridiculously unrealistic, but it takes place within a narrative world whose disregard of such considerations is suggested by the utterly disparate combinations and juxtapositions it sets up. The notion of an Atteridgeville shebeen containing a statue of Lenin, from which, perhaps, coloured lights may be strung (34), is a possibility that can be entertained (and, of course, is there to entertain). In a verbal sense, this is echoed in Grekov's polyphonic letter, with its totally unexpected verbal flights and its uninhibited, farcical melange of registers and idioms in defiance of all rules of grammar and expression.

Brian McHale connects the polyphonic - which he identifies as a key aspect of postmodern fiction - to the carnivalesque, which juxtaposes and combines the incongruous and the incompatible, interweaving a variety of registers and styles (172). What he neglects to add is that part of the force of the polyphonic in its literary manifestation lies in the way in which it can be - and, indeed, in the above extract, is - extremely funny.

Polyphonics is a hybrid form and, as such, has the capacity to break through old ways of seeing, with their set categories, hierarchies and constraints. Through its extraordinary, indiscriminate fusions and juxtapositions, the polyphonic creates conditions that could give life to the new. In his discussion of Rabelaisian laughter (which is rooted in pre-class folklore and expresses qualities of the carnival) Mikhail Bakhtin observes that not only does such laughter destabilise established structures and hierarchies, but it also brings together that which has traditionally been separated and disunited (1981: 170). Through the destruction of customary connections and hierarchies and 'the creation of unexpected matrices, unexpected connections ... a new picture of the world necessarily opens up' (Bakhtin 1981: 168). A comparable point is made by Salman Rushdie, who values *The Satanic Verses* (1988) precisely because of its hybridity. Transformation, he asserts, can come through 'impurity, intermingling ... new and unexpected combinations. ...[N]ewness enters the world [through] ... change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining' (1991: 394). He envisages these qualities having the capacity to symbolically 'contaminate' the life-denying absolutism of those who insist on an ideological purity based on separation, isolation and exclusion. While suggesting something similar in its ridiculing of various forms of political authority, the vision of 'newness' in 'Propaganda by Monuments' has another dimension to it, which arises from its comic nature.

At first glance, both Grekov and Khumalo seem puny and insignificant in the context of their societies, dwarfed by the huge, impersonal cities that surround them. However, we soon see that their unquenchable enthusiasm and their ability to perceive potential in the midst of the most unpromising surroundings gives them the capacity to assert themselves, mentally and emotionally, over their situations. Energetically and creatively, they explore means of reshaping and expanding their realities through incorporating elements and areas of experience which, in practical terms, might seem beyond their reach. In this way, they represent the capacity for psychic freedoms in societies that have long aspired to keep their citizens in a state of

bland passivity. The narrative deals with the passing away of frozen, monolithic symbols of past political power - Lenin in Moscow, Strijdom in Pretoria - but it replaces them not with images of a transformed political order, but rather with the ephemeral, festive sphere of the V.I. Lenin Bar & Grill, as a symbol of the carnivalesque liberties it realises. Appropriately, then, the story concludes with Khumalo beginning 'to see how, but not necessarily why, the impossible came to pass' (38).

'Propaganda by Monuments' serves to make us aware of post-apartheid South Africa's potential for greater imaginative freedoms. This arises, in part, from its disorderly and confusing nature, in which the old and new jostle side by side, and a medley of competing discourses strive to be heard. The tale takes advantage of the creative potential of this - yet, to date, the majority of South African writers in English have failed to follow Vladislavic's example.

But, of all Vladislavic's stories, the most clear image of carnivalesque triumph takes place in 'The Tuba'. The tale situates itself within the dull, aggressive world of unregenerate white South African masculinity, depicting characters who '[keep] the braai fires burning' (1) in more ways than one. A black Salvation Army band stops just outside the house where the central characters are gathered and begins playing Christmas carols. The most racist, belligerent member of the group, Sergeant Dundas, fetches his tuba and attempts to outplay the band, with the following result:

The music closed over the Sergeant like brown water.

Harrumphing, bleating, wheezing, waving his head from side to side, he churned up and down, butting at the players with the bell of the tuba. They whirled aside and shuffled along beside him, as if they were all being dragged hither and thither by the same currents. Suddenly they were swirling on the pavement, in a gathering cloud of dust, and with each pass there seemed to be more of them, and the music grew louder and more forceful. ...

Sergeant Dundas's legs jerked, his arms twitched, he began to dance, nodding his head and stamping his feet, swimming in slow motion. They all moved off down Chromium Street. (11)

The carnivalesque aspects of this passage are centred on the Salvation Army Band. It fulfils the same type of role as that of the travelling show in postmodern literature which, as McHale observes, often serves as an agent of disruption, and also as a means of incorporating the supernatural or the fantastical into everyday reality (174). In the case of the former function, when the band transforms a figure as reactionary and self-important as Sergeant Dundas into part of its jubilant procession, it makes a mockery of his attempts to assert control over the situation, thereby symbolically overturning the world view he represents.

This extract goes beyond subversion, however. Its visionary aspect lies in the way in which it concludes with the unlikely image of Sergeant Dundas dancing. In this manner, 'The Tuba' offers us a glimpse of a world in which oppositions and polarities

melt away and nothing, however hardened and inflexible it may seem, is impervious to mutation. The recurrent water imagery in the passage emphasises this sense of fluidity, as well as the unconfined nature of the creative energies at work in the story as a whole. The way in which these forces make their presence felt in the midst of the drabness of everyday life, evoked in the sterility of the name Chromium Street, a typical street name in certain formerly white lower class areas in this country, is intimated in the description of the way in which the band flows down this dusty suburban road, bearing Sergeant Dundas with it.

There is still more to the passage than this. As a result of the way in which the band becomes a means of integrating the magical into reality, the extract also suggests something about the nature of aesthetic engagement. In doing so, the concept of pleasure is given further emphasis, for the above scene offers a fictional reflection on certain fundamental qualities of the former. Art, to quote Steiner again, does not simply involve 'the enactment of a one-way power relation' (92). It cannot purely be 'mastered', as Sergeant Dundas attempts, by compelling it to submit to the specific analyses that we bring to bear on it. It also involves delight, which always evades our attempts to control it.<sup>11</sup> Steiner views aesthetic pleasure as a state of 'enlightened beguilement': intellectual engagement combined with a surrender to the joys that art provides (92, 206). The music that overwhelms and eventually bears off Sergeant Dundas offers, in fantastical form, a visual image of this process of abandonment. In the process, it emphasises the potency of aesthetic bliss. All too often we tend to underestimate the latter, in the same way that Sergeant Dundas scorns and ridicules the Salvation Army Band, only to find, too late, that he is in the grip of its enchantment.

Yet the magic of art never takes place in a vacuum. Just as Sergeant Dundas could not have been borne off were it not for the discipline and skill on the part of the band, we are only able to accept what happens to Sergeant Dundas because Vladislavic is able to convince us imaginatively that such things are possible within the world of his story. The opening image of the music that 'close[s] over Sergeant Dundas like brown water' and the final description of him 'swimming in slow motion' down Chromium Street frames a passage in which the words and images weave a spell that catches the reader in it in the same way that Sergeant Dundas is captured by the music created by the band.

Another previously raised point is worth re-visiting. Our specific situation as South Africans (or people with some awareness of the nature of this country's society) plays a fundamental role in shaping our response to this extract. The delight the passage gives us is, therefore, not something abstract and unfocused, but rather it springs particularly from the fact that Sergeant Dundas is such a clearly recognisable South African type, the fate that befalls him so incongruous and yet at the same time so marvellously apposite. Those like him continue rock-like in their determination to cling to the old ways of life, discordant presences within the broader communities they inhabit, and yet the story deals with this character by overwhelming, most

particularly, these specific aspects of his nature.

These three stories, then, embody vividly the most characteristic quality of Vladislavic's writing: the way in which, through its verbal and imaginative play, it sails over the checks and controls that still prevail in much South African fiction. The tale in *Propaganda by Monuments* in which this quality is most notably evident is 'Alphabets for Surplus People.' The South Africa depicted in Part II of the piece, 'The Comings and Goings around the Marmer of the Nation', is inhabited by a range of groups, each of whom give rise to a verbal fireworks display of the recognisable, the everyday and the surreal:

Marmer's Counsellors wield a lemon slice, a sundae spoon, a jar of honey, and a stainless-steel funnel to ensure that their sweet, refreshing counsel never splashes. ...

Marmer's Ventriloquists throw their voices downstairs: then utensils applaud her, the kettle sings her praises, the coal-scuttle declares itself willing and able to burst into love. (111, 113)

These extracts do not obscure the distortions and manipulations, and even, at times, the sense of menace, inherent in the particular type of power politics they engage with. Yet they transform them into part of a lyrical alphabetical parade of sounds and images that interweave the potentially significant and the extravagantly absurd. In the process, sounds and words acquire a force of their own independent of reliable signifiers. The figure of Marmer may resemble Winnie Mandela in certain respects, yet she is also a fabulous creation in her own right, capering with her attendants through a festival of language.<sup>12</sup>

Paradoxically, we have seen that 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. In precisely these aspects, Vladislavic's fiction creates a realm in which the institutions, conventions and forces that regulate or govern our society are made into part of the game. By opening up spaces within which a range of freedoms are possible, his work not only offers us symbolic images of liberation, but reminds us of our own capacity for emotional, psychic and imaginative forms of the latter.

In closing, a point made near the outset requires further emphasis. While critics such as Huizinga and Le Guin remind us of the developmental, psychological and creative functions that play fulfils, they emphasise that, first and foremost, play is important in itself, for, to quote Huizinga, 'it adorns and amplifies life' (9). This is not mere frivolous decoration (as many writers and critics of South African fiction would have us believe), but a necessity, for without play, we are deprived of an integral part of existence. For too long, South African writers in English have been discouraged from playing, and we are all the poorer for it.

Vladislavic's fiction is not always effective. *The Folly* (1993), which has at its heart a game of endlessly deferred meanings, has a curiously flattened, abstract nature. While the novel is intellectually intriguing, the descriptions it contains tend to

seem dry, even pedestrian, as if events have been observed from a distance and methodically but mechanically recorded. Several of Vladislavic's stories are characterised by a comparable sterile, clinical quality, such as 'Flashback Hotel' in *Missing Persons* or 'The Omniscope (Pat. Pending)' in *Propaganda by Monuments*. These tales inhabit an uneasy middle ground, in which one could envisage them containing richly suggestive imaginative potential on the one hand, but being, just as possibly, devoid of meaningful content on the other.

But at its best, Vladislavic's work, with the centrality that it accords to the idea of play for its own sake, brings to the fore an area that, by and large, South African literature in English has preferred to exclude. With its pet Prime Ministers, spellbinding Salvation Army Bands and the V.I. Lenin shebeen as a symbol of the new South Africa, his fiction sets off on a carnivalesque parade, in which words and images become dancers and acrobats and we, the critics, become part of its ludic progress. In this way, it displays to the staid and restrained literary arena through which it cavorts those aspects of experience which - like Sergeant Dundas - this arena ignores at its own cost. At the same time it presents a challenge, through its very creative potential, to the majority of South African writers in English - one which, significantly, these writers seem not to have been able, at the time of this writing, to take up.

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## Notes

1. While the early 1990s were characterised by the radical political changes that resulted in the African National Congress taking governmental control in 1994, the 1980s were a time of intense political oppression.

Yet, despite this, Nadine Gordimer felt able to assert as early as 1982, 'I live ... in a society whirling, stamping, swaying with the force of revolutionary change' (1988: 262). In many respects, the oppressive and authoritarian actions on the part of the government during the 1980s represented a desperate attempt to retain control of a situation that was moving beyond its grasp.

2. In Vladislavic's work, a sense of diversity and discontinuity is suggested in a range of highly unique ways, but, as Marais remarks, even in more conventional short stories, aspects such as the sense of closure generated by the conclusions of stories, variety of genre or type or merely the number of stories contained in a collection and the differences between them convey a sense of variety and dissimilarity (1992: 42).

3. This is in keeping with the nature of Vladislavic's creative process. The starting point for his writing, he states, is a visual or verbal image, which he develops by means of a process of free thought (Hadland 1990: 4).

4. Significantly, Vladislavic acknowledges the influence of Afrikaans writers - who contrast sharply with writers in English, both in terms of their use of more innovative techniques and their interest in the fantastic:

I was fortunate to discover Afrikaans literature as a student. ... Reading the sestigers and prominent writers of the seventies like John Miles and Breyten Breytenbach gave me a

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very different set of models for writing about South Africa: going back to your earlier question about the sources of the 'fantastical' elements in my work, here are some of the culprits (Wood 2000: 10).

5. As the title of Steiner's book indicates, pleasure participates in the shocking and forbidden. She explores this aspect when she discusses various sado-masochistic photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe. The photographs give delight, she claims because of the naughtiness, the wicked humor, the irony, the titillating contradictoriness, the perversity of these works of art. The photographs are camp and confrontational. They are rude. They put the viewer on the spot ... There is pleasure in being shocked, in being ridiculed for one's conventionality, in looking at a piece of wit in which the absolutely most proscribed taboo is presented as formally pleasing (56).
6. Barthes incorporates certain of the cruelties, both self-inflicted and imposed on others, that form part of Sadeian sexual ecstasies into the realms of intellectual bliss. He compares the pleasure of the text to the experience of Sade's libertine who hangs himself and then chokes the very moment of orgasm to cut the rope in an 'untenable, impossible, purely *novelistic instant*' (1975: 7).
7. Trudi Adendorff notes that the short story is particularly '[suitable] for realistic expression of a fragmented and restless modern consciousness, as well as for capturing the essential transitoriness of all facets of modern life' (1985: 139-140). In Vladislavic's case, his use of the short story suggests this and more: evoking especially vividly the shifting nature of 1980s and 1990s South Africa and the disconnected, unstable nature of many of the white members of that society.
8. Ken Barris, for example, finds the story distasteful (1990: 6).
9. It is no coincidence that the characters in the first two stories - and, for all we know - perhaps the third are black.
10. J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), with its overall atmosphere of despairing gloom, is a recent example of this tendency.
11. The carnivalesque, in its 'opposition to theory, to the capturing force of conceptuality' offers an appropriate image of this, as Steven Connor observes (1992: 215).
12. The above passage reveals Vladislavic's fascination with words, indicating particularly clearly the pre-eminent role they play in his fiction, while also suggesting the pleasure he derives from working with them. 'What amuses me in the act of writing' he claims, 'seems to have less to do with situation or character than with the strangeness and artificiality of language itself' (Wood 2000: 10).

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