

# Second “Nature” and Autofictional Strategies in Ivan Vladislavic’s *Portrait with Keys: Joburg and What-What*

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## Abstract

In 2006, Ivan Vladislavic published *Portrait with Keys*. Very soon this text was described as the South African novelist’s “first non fiction work”. In this article, I show that Vladislavic’s text is not a non-fiction work but rather an expert mixture of autobiographical and factual information which can be described as autofictional (Doubrovsky, 1975; Hubier, 2003; Lecarme and Lecarme-Tabone, 2004; Gasparini, 2008; Burgelin, Grell and Roche, 2011). As Lenta (2009) contends, *Portrait with Keys* is part of a hybrid genre, “an experiment with genre that combines biography, autobiography, historical writing and the essay to explore the everyday life of Johannesburg, the city in which its author lives and works”, influenced by French writers and documenters of the quotidian de Certeau, Pérec, Serres and Lefèbvre. In this odd urban dossier of Johannesburg the writer’s deliberate ‘ramblings’ invite the reader to enter this city, which can be analyzed as the author’s second nature on the one hand, and nature’s second nature on the other, as at once a significant South African space and as an individual autobiography which encompasses art and life, in short “the quirky art of living”. The emphasis here will be on the presence/absence of elements of nature and natural environment in contemporary autofictional writing.

**Keywords:** autofiction; Mother nature; second nature; city; Ivan Vladislavic; *Portrait with Keys*

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีที่น่าสนใจ คือ การวิเคราะห์วรรณกรรมชิ้นสำคัญของ อีวาน วลาดิสลาวิช (Ivan Vladislavic) เรื่อง *พอร์เทรท วิท คีย์ส* หรือคำเฉลยบนภาพวาด (*Portrait with Keys*) เป็นงานเขียนที่ไม่จัดว่าเป็นงานวรรณกรรม แต่ผู้เขียนบทความนี้ต้องการโต้แย้งว่างานเขียนนี้เป็นอัตชีวประวัติแบบหนึ่ง ด้วยการวิเคราะห์ลักษณะตลอดจนกลยุทธ์

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และวิธีการเขียนที่รวมประวัติทางด้านของผู้เขียนที่สอดแทรกในข้อมูลที่เป็นข้อเท็จจริงในสถานที่ ที่กล่าวถึงเรื่องราวที่เขียนมีลักษณะเป็นงานวรรณกรรมเช่นเดียวกับวรรณกรรมบันเทิงคดีซึ่งเลนต้า (Lenta 2009) ได้ให้ข้อสังเกตว่างานเขียนชิ้นนี้มีลักษณะเป็นลูกผสมของการเขียนวรรณกรรมที่รวมเอาชีวประวัติ อัตชีวประวัติ บันทึกทางประวัติศาสตร์ และข้อวิจารณ์ที่สอดคล้องกับชีวิตประจำวันของผู้คนในเมืองโจฮันเนสเบิร์ก (Johannesburg) ซึ่งผู้เขียนเคยใช้ชีวิตอยู่และทำงานที่นั่น การที่ผู้เขียนจงใจบรรยายเหตุการณ์ต่าง ๆ โดยละเอียดเท่ากับเปิดโอกาสให้คนอ่านได้สัมผัสวิถีชีวิตของผู้คนในเมืองโจฮันเนสเบิร์ก (Johannesburg) ตลอดจนสะท้อนอุปนิสัยของผู้เขียนไปด้วยและในทางกลับกันคนอ่านก็ยังเข้าถึงลักษณะที่เป็นธรรมชาติของผู้คนในเมืองโจฮันเนสเบิร์ก (Johannesburg) ที่สะท้อนความเป็นอัฟริกาใต้ของผู้เขียนและตลอดจนบ่งบอกความเป็นตัวตนจากงานศิลปะชิ้นนี้ไปด้วยกัน บทความนี้จึงเน้นประเด็นที่สะท้อนความเป็นปัจจุบันรวมทั้งสิ่งที่ขาดหายไปบางส่วนซึ่งถือเป็นลักษณะตามธรรมชาติของการเขียนเชิงอัตชีวประวัติแบบใหม่

**คำสำคัญ:** อีวาน วลาดิสลาวิช, วรรณกรรมบันเทิง



## Introduction

In South Africa, postmodern and postcolonial writing strategies were intensified at the end of Apartheid, since the grand narrative of black versus white or the Apartheid regime against the anti-apartheid struggle also became frayed. Many different narratives emerged that form a labyrinth, through which each individual has to navigate her own way in order to find a form of survival that defies easy categorization. In South Africa, autofictional writing offers a space to discover the ‘other nature’ of writing.

In particular, the second-generation South African writer of Croatian, Irish, English, and German descent, Ivan Vladislavic began publishing fiction in the late 1980s. His short stories, novels, and nonfiction writings, ranging from *Missing Persons* in 1989 to *Portrait with Keys* in 2006, frequently examine South Africa’s political transformation through the shifting architecture and infrastructure of the city of Johannesburg. As recent work on his representation

of Johannesburg attests, scholars are beginning to emphasize the importance of space, place, and construction within these narratives<sup>2</sup>. Vladislavic’s work, in this light, challenges the desire to fix the past in a museum and satirizes the need to impose order upon a changing Johannesburg.

In this paper the concepts of autobiography and autofiction are compared and contrasted in light of Ivan Vladislavic’s 2006 text entitled *Portrait with keys*. Vladislavic’s text can then no longer be seen a non-fiction work but rather an expert mixture of autobiographical, factual information and clever fictional strategies which can be described as autofictional (Dobrovsky, Hubier, Lecarme and Lecarme-Tabone, Gasparini, Burgelin et al.). As Lenta (2009) contends, *Portrait with Keys*, is part of a hybrid genre, “an experiment with genre that combines biography, autobiography, historical writing and the essay to explore the everyday life of Johannesburg, the city in which its author lives and works”, influenced by French writers and

<sup>2</sup>Shane Graham, writing about public monuments in Vladislavic’s fiction, argues that “the disorientation and historical amnesia that characterize post-apartheid life and culture result at least in part from the contestation on several fronts of spatial configurations that reinforce older social formations” (73–74).

documenters of the quotidian de Certeau, Debord, Pérec and Lefèbvre. In this manner, Vladislavic's approach is similar to J.M. Coetzee's, the other, more famous, South African autofictional author.

In his odd urban dossier of Johannesburg Vladislavic's deliberate ramblings invite the reader to enter this city, which can be analyzed as the author's second nature on the one hand, and "nature"'s second nature on the other, as, at once, a significant South African space and as an individual autobiography which encompasses art and life, in short "the quirky art of living". The presence/absence of elements of nature and natural environment in contemporary autofictional writing leads to the conclusion that autofiction, as an example of quintessential postmodern and postcolonial writing style, affords more opportunities for the writing of urban settings and events, which is seen in Vladislavic's work.

## Autobiography and Autofiction

With regard to the limits between fiction and reality, there have been profound changes in the field of autobiography since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Autobiography refers to an onomastic identity of author, narrator and main character through which someone's whole life is narrated. In general, autobiographies are written by important people at the end of their life or after consequent events. According to Philippe Lejeune, there has to be an autobiographical pact between the reader and the writer.

The word autofiction was officially coined in 1977 by Serge Doubrovsky to describe his novel *Fils* (Threads/Son). Doubrovsky imagined a genre between fiction and autobiography in which the author, protagonist, and narrator also share one identity, but in which, at the same time, the impact

of fiction is palpable. He explained the idea on the back cover of *Fils*:

Autobiographie ? Non, c'est un privilège réservé aux importants de ce monde, au soir de leur vie, et dans un beau style. Fiction, d'évènements et de faits strictement réels; si l'on veut autofiction, d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure à l'aventure d'un langage en liberté, hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman, traditionnel ou nouveau. Rencontres, fils de mots, allitérations, assonances, dissonances, écriture d'avant ou d'après littérature, concrète, comme on dit musique.

Autobiography? No, that is a privilege reserved for the important people of this world, at the end of their lives, in a refined style. Fiction, of strictly real events and facts; autofiction, if you will; to have entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language, outside of the wisdom and the syntax of the novel, traditional or new. Interactions, threads of words, alliterations, assonances, dissonances, writing before or after literature, concrete, as we say, music. (my translation)

Doubrovsky's description, according a large part to stylistic strategies, of the differences between autobiography and autofiction has inspired debate among literary critics, journalists, and authors in France over the past three decades. Many have questioned whether autofiction is in fact different from autobiography, criticizing Doubrovsky's assertion that autobiography is "reserved for the important people of this world". Nevertheless, "Fiction, of strictly real events and facts" has become the working definition of autofiction, and the "adventure of language" has come to describe its innovative

style. Célestin (400) quotes Doubrovsky on memory:

Memory itself is fictive, is fictitious, memory itself may harbor screened memories. We have learnt that sincerity, which was the old regulating principle of autobiography, is not enough. The meaning of one's life in certain ways escapes us, so we have to reinvent it in our writing, and that is what I personally call autofiction. It doesn't mean that you write any old thing that comes to your mind about yourself. You try to recapture phrases of yourself, but you know, you're aware that, to a large extent, it's only the way you tell the story to yourself.

Autofiction is distinguished from autobiography mainly by the fact that it is not written "at the end of life" by someone "good or great" and "known or shown", but can be written at any time in the life of anyone. It is different also because it does not intend to write life as a whole, in one go, it rather gives fragments of life, not necessarily in a chronological order. In short, autofiction and autobiography both have a narrator who shares the same name with the author, but autofiction is, unlike autobiography, almost never linear. Where autobiography is played in truth, autofiction moves in the real world. The facts are real, but the writer builds a thread from these facts which, while maintaining the pact with the reader, tells that what turned out to have been lived in reality becomes different altogether when we write it down. Autofictional authors allow themselves to reverse dates, to "forget" "true" items, to interfere with the objective truth and to describe a subjective Self, without "feeling guilty" about doing so because they are not "bound" by the autobiographical pact.

In short, in opposition to autobiography, in an autofiction "there is the prefix auto, it is therefore I who constructs me, and this is followed by fiction: I construct myself in any way I want" (I stress the latter part of this sentence: in any way I want). Where autobiographies pretend to tell the truth – the whole truth and nothing but the truth, autofictional texts do not allow this type of contract with the reader. Nevertheless, Hubier (121) explicits a contractual agreement when he points out that autofiction would also be submitted to a contractual deal of truthfulness. But, this time, with the conscient knowledge on the part of the reader and the writer, that this remains but an intention and can never be a reality, since "promising to tell the truth does not mean anything", "even if this promise to tell the truth and the distinction between truth and lie are the basis of all social relationships" (Lejeune 37-38). Michel Serres, the French philosopher, asks these questions in *Who am I?* The self, he says, is a patchwork resembling a Harlequin's coat, a badly stitched tatter, a conjunction of adjectives. The self is a mixed body: studded, spotted, zebra, tigroid, shimmering, spotted like an ocelot, whose life must be its business.

## Ivan Vladislavic: Biography and Bibliography

Ivan Vladislavic is the author of the novels *The Folly*, *The Exploded View* and *Double Negative*, and has edited volumes on architecture and art. His book *Portrait with Keys* documents Johannesburg, one of South Africa's main cities. His short stories have been collected in the volume *Flashback Hotel*. Vladislavic's work has been published and translated widely and has won many awards, including the *University of Johannesburg Prize* and the *Sunday Times Alan Paton Award* for non-fiction. The

author lives in Johannesburg. Vladislavic's style is postmodern, intermingling fantasy with references to historic events, enabling them to signify with symbolic meanings both within a South African context and beyond. His is a distinctively individual voice. His first published work is entitled *Missing Persons*. Next comes *The Folly* (1993), situated in an apparently recognisable world, describes the building of a house from string, but the relevance extends to considerations of the imagination and to a satire of the political notion of constructing a new world. The novel received the CNA Literary Award. In 1996, he published *Propaganda by Monuments*, a collection of short stories. *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) is the etymologically dazzling story of Johannesburg suburb Hillbrow's makeover from frayed Euro-café society to shabby Afro-soul. Through the withering scorn of Aubrey Tearle, the novel's chief crank, the reader visits the dramatic moment - somewhere in the early 1990s - when these two worlds collide, often with hilarious results. *The Exploded View*, 2004, is sometimes referred to as a collection of short stories, but Vladislavic himself considers this work to be a novel in four parts, set in and around Johannesburg. *The Exploded View* is composed of four interlinked stories that focus on art and architecture: the places people choose to live and the things they seek to create, while his skill at handling subtle social commentary and political satire is evident throughout. In 2005, Vladislavic published *Willem Boshoff* which can best be described as an extended essay on the work of this conceptual artist, David Krut.

*Portrait with Keys* was published in June 2006, and is an archive of writings on a small

segment of Johannesburg that has been walked, observed and reflected upon over the years by the author. *Portrait with Keys* consists of 138 numbered short texts, each addressing life in Johannesburg. The time frame stretches from recollections of the late 1970s to the immediate present. The protagonist is, in most instances, Ivan Vladislavić himself, although there are dozens of other characters with whom he shares encounters and interactions. In June 2007 Vladislavic won the Sunday Times Alan Paton Award for Nonfiction for *Portrait with Keys*. The judges called it a masterpiece and found it indicative of a trend among South African non-fiction to look « inwards in order to examine the outwards ». Another two texts have been published since 2006: the novel *Double Negative* in 2011 and *Flashback Hotel: Early Stories*, a collection of short stories, also in 2011.

### Portrait with Keys

In *Portrait with Keys*, Vladislavic takes a sideways glance at "his" city, Johannesburg. He uses the metaphor<sup>3</sup> of the map as a way of navigating and communicating in the city. The map becomes necessary in the labyrinth of the city as opposed to the rural village where everyone knows each other and the stranger is a rare occurrence. S/he is therefore recognized immediately and treated with suspicion. On the other hand, "asking for directions, city people, who set great store by their independence and hard-won knowledge of the streets, who like to think that they 'know their way around', declare their vulnerability; giving directions, they demonstrate a capacity for dealing kindly and responsibly with a life put in their hands by fate" (12).

<sup>3</sup>The frequent use of metaphors is also an indication of autofictional writing strategies. The metaphor of explosion is central to Vladislavic's vision of Johannesburg, reappearing in his nonfiction writing as well as in his stories: "When a house has been alarmed, it becomes explosive", thus begins *Portrait with Keys* (11).

The meaning beyond the use of the map and the city is clearly autofictional: the routes we take tell the unique story of our lives:

It is also true that the complexity of cities, the flows of traffic across ever-changing grids, coupled with the peculiarities of physical addresses, occupations, interests and needs, produces for each one of us a particular pattern of familiar or habitual movement over the skin of the earth, which, if we could see it from a vantage point in the sky, would appear as unique as a fingerprint (12).

Within this maze, “it is literally impossible for certain of these paths to cross, which is why acquaintances may live in the same city, meeting by appointment as often as they choose, without ever running into one another in the daily round” (12f.). This last citation comes from a footnote; similar to a research article, the author wants to indicate that some form of authenticity, of truth accompanies this statement by turning it into a footnote. Nevertheless, the autofictional author continues, “experience has taught me, and a host of writers have confirmed that getting lost is not always a bad thing. One might even consider misdirecting a stranger for his own good.” (13)

At the end of *Portrait with Keys*, Vladislavic himself provides an itinerary for navigating various paths through his own fragmented and labyrinthine text<sup>4</sup>. The inclusion of various paths that can be followed by the auctorial Self points to an autofictional type of writing: indeed, an individual

faces a variety of possibilities in life, that are not necessarily predetermined and a person’s life changes dramatically according to the choices s/he makes. On the contents page there is a dotted line between “Point A” and “Point B”. The implication is that there are many possibilities of reaching point B, including getting lost in between. He has even used previously published texts in this patchwork of the city, thus blurring the distinction between the documentary and the fictional while confounding the reader’s expectation of the original, authorized text, even if the sources are duly stated at the back of the book. The routes are classified according to their lengths: Long, Moderate and Short. They are ordered alphabetically: for example, the “long” cycle titled “An accidental island” is re-ordered, thus opening new lines of association with other fragments of the text. It is followed by the keyword “Artist’s book” (205f) which is the “moderate” route and contains references to cosmopolitan artists such as Esther Mahlangu, who is renowned for her bright Ndebele paintings, which she painted onto a BMW, Henion Han, South Africa-born filmographer, Ilona Anderson, a South African painter, threads (embroidery) and installation artist, Renier le Roux, a South African sculptor, Sue Williamson, England-born South African artist, founder and editor of *Artthrob*, an online art journal, Genpei Akasegawa, Japanese Hyper-artist, Martin Kippenberger, German artist known for his extremely prolific output in a wide range of styles and media as well as his provocative, jocular and hard-drinking public persona, William Kentridge<sup>5</sup>, and Ilse Pahl, both South African artists exploring the private and public meanings

<sup>4</sup>According to the author himself, the model for the thematic index at the end can be found “in Humphrey Jennings’s great compendium of readings, *Pandemonium. The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*”(211).

<sup>5</sup>Kentridge is perhaps best known for his animated films and drawings that explore the emotional distress in South Africa, caused by apartheid and racial reconciliation. His choice of medium, dark imagined charcoal drawings, occasional color, and his style of rendering make his artwork even more distressing than the already apparent topic.

attached to daily-used objects. In manipulating the ready-made, possible new meanings and contemporary narratives are suggested.

The autofictional novel further contains entries on “Beggars and sellers”, “Liars and thieves”, “Walking” and “Young lives”, once again including the practice of the everyday, as the Belgian Michel de Certeau put it. These keywords form the entry points to Vladislavic’s labyrinthine, encyclopaedic, a-linear text. The encyclopaedia thus presented is highly subjective, informed by the writer’s own needs and interests, and therefore does not lay any claim to totality. This is evident in the relative shortness of its 211 pages.

Ironically, during one of his walks, Vladislavic visits the Johannesburg Art Gallery in the inner city, where an exhibition is mounted by Sophie Calle<sup>6</sup> on the way East Germans remember public spaces where the signs of power of the former regime have been removed. On his way out, he is confronted by a street child who washes his face in a basin of the toilet of the gallery with a ream of toilet paper:

On my left, set into the curved wall that discreetly screens the toilets from the exhibition space, is a concrete ledge, and happening to glance down as I pass it, I see a grubby white sneaker sticking out. I bend down and look under the ledge. There is an oddly shaped recess I would never have noticed. Two small boys are crammed into it. They smell of wood smoke and sweat. They draw in their legs and

look at me with wide eyes. (31).

The narrator is unsure whether he should call the security guard or “let them have a warm bed for the night” (31). He observes that he remains ambivalent like a “true art lover”, as the guard locks the door behind him as he leaves the parking lot. The question is how one could capture this irony in art as it makes a mockery both of the concern with security and marks the fine line between art and the harsh reality it masks. This irony and ambiguity has become a marker of post-apartheid writing, however, with its emphasis on the ordinary which is by definition open-ended. It is, at the same time, a sign of autofictional hybridity, where the Self is not rigid, not fixed once and for all, and therefore, again, open-ended. Form and content resemble each other in this case: the theme of the autofictional novel purveys fragmented writing, the form (short bits and pieces which can be reassembled in a variety of ways, some of which are proposed by the author himself at the end of the work – I indicated this earlier on) does the same.

This particular autofictional text is exemplary of post-apartheid novels, deeply rooted in the South African context. Crime, which has been cited by many white South Africans as their main reason for leaving the country, plays a central role in *Portrait with Keys*. It appears under the key words in the index as “Security” (to which its opposite “insecurity” refers back to), as well as in “Safe and sound” and the dreaded “City centre” that is avoided like a warzone by most white South

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<sup>6</sup>In “Can Pain Be Exquisite? Autofictional Stagings of *Douleurexquise* by Sophie Calle, *Forced Entertainment* and Frank Gehry and Edwin Chan”, Anneleen Masschelein (2007) explains that Calle’s oeuvre is tributary to the conceptual tradition in the French avant-garde and influenced by psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and postmodernism. It is described with the label ‘autofiction’, this autobiographical subgenre in which the authenticity and truth-claims underlying traditional autobiography are questioned by a mixture of autobiographical, theoretical and fictional elements.

Africans. As Vladislavic checked the details of his novel *The restless supermarket* set in Hillbrow during the apartheid years retrospectively, he passes “the ghosts of cafés, the Pigalle and the Zürich, the Café Wien and the Café de Paris” (37). The names of the cafés evoke a European cosmopolitanism transposed onto Africa and invoking them again could be seen as a form of white nostalgia and melancholia. This shows the ambivalence of Vladislavic as a post-apartheid white writer who never supported Afrikaner Nationalism but nevertheless benefitted from the security it afforded him. In this way race still plays an important role in the social imaginary even after apartheid was officially abolished in 1994.

*Portrait with Keys* reminds the reader of Orhan Pamuk’s Istanbul, sometimes of James Joyce’s Dublin and occasionally of JG Links’s Venice for Pleasure, but it is really altogether one of a kind. As Lenta (119) contends, *Portrait with keys*, is part of a hybrid genre, “harnessing the documentary potential of diverse genres-autobiography, biography, historical writing and the essay-to apprehend the topology of Vladislavic’s “home” city, Johannesburg”. In his writing, Vladislavic is influenced by French writers and documenters of the quotidian Michel de Certeau (whom he quotes in an epigraph), Georges Perec and Henri Lefèbvre. According to Lenta (120), *Portrait with Keys* “incorporates a self-reflexive awareness of [Vladislavic’s] employment of the techniques of French theorists of the everyday. I will now, briefly, indicate some of the, mainly autofictional, strategies the author uses in his work.

## Autofiction and Autofictional Strategies in *Portrait with Keys*

Authors who write about cities often wrap their narratives around set-pieces - descriptions of festivals, say, historic events or unforgettable buildings, but Vladislavic’s Johannesburg is a vast, riverless metropolis without icons, which has shambled through its short history fateful but ungainly, and emerged from the miseries of apartheid into a condition of more or less perpetual criminal siege. Padlocks and keys, security guards, guns, muggers, barricades and shutters - these are its predominant civic images. Vladislavic gives detailed accounts of what he sees as he wanders the streets he registers mostly small, apparently irrelevant things, peripherals, suggestions, snatches of news from the day’s papers, like a scavenger picking up rubbish.

One day, for example, he may pause to contemplate a very African wall-painting ornamenting a very ordinary bourgeois villa in Blenheim Street. On another he learns that a nodding acquaintance in the neighbourhood has been murdered. He develops somewhat reluctant intimacies with panhandlers and unofficial car minders. He notices disused tramlines emerging, like gold deposits, through the crumbled surface of a street. He is burgled, of course, and he has a bunch of keys so majestic that when a Swedish magazine photographer comes to take his picture, she takes a picture of his keys too<sup>7</sup>.

Images often recur in Vladislavic’s 138 passages of the vaguely rhythmic cycles he makes in this autofiction of “automobility”. One repetitive motif, for instance, is subterraneanness. In his cyclical

<sup>7</sup>When Vladislavic is photographed by this Swedish journalist, she points out that only a janitor would have as many keys in Sweden as he does. He feels shamed by them then, “lying there like the keys to my psyche, a feeler gauge for every insecurity”. (84). Similarly he and his partner keep a monkey wrench which a burglar left behind next to the fireplace, “less as a trophy than a measure of everyday abnormality” (95).

register, the motif has eight entries, ranging from the secret supply stores that Johannesburg tramps and layabouts keep under street man-hatches, to a horrific plan to build underground hostels for the miners of the Reef.

Nature is underrepresented in this portrayal of Johannesburg. One example to the contrary is the image of the gorilla which in Vladislavic's autofiction refers to nature and city life; 18 passages deal with the "gorilla". The black man and the gorilla have been linked down the centuries of the European presence, and the great ape still haunts the Johannesburg imagination. The Gorilla lock is the most elementally robust of locally available car locks. "A fucking gorilla" is what Police Commissioner Jackie Selebi allegedly calls Sergeant Jeanette Mothiba (although the Police Complaints Commission decides he merely called her a chimpanzee). And perhaps there is an element of inherited guilt to the outpouring of public sympathy that reaches Max, the Johannesburg Zoo's western lowland gorilla, when he is shot in the neck by a robber—he is even given his own website, and "there were emotional scenes", it is reported, "when the unconscious primate was taken to hospital".

Forever-present in Johannesburg are the echoes of ancient guilts and prejudices, like the distant rumble of traffic on the Main Reef Road. Vladislavic describes how he repetitively wanders around in Johannesburg: "Every day I trawl along my habitual routes ready to be startled by something else I have missed until now" (176)<sup>8</sup>. The everyday is thereby transformed, it becomes an autofictional element in that the "unperceived" becomes important "in the sense that we have always looked past it ... [it] is what we never see for the first time but can

only see again, having always already seen it by an illusion that is constitutive of the everyday" (Blanchot, 1993: 240). These wanderings are part of the thematic shifts and discontinuities, observations and descriptions through which readers have to work "with no stated rationale", or they can choose "itineraries" provided at the end of the novel, some kind of "thematic pathways through the book" (Vladislavic, 205).

According to Blanchot (1993, 239), the everyday becomes something that "allows no hold" and "escapes" categorization, in some ways it is like autofiction itself which cannot easily be categorized, as ... have demonstrated. Lenta (2009: 121) links this type of autofiction with other documenters of the quotidian: "it is the manifestations of everydayness that attract [Vladislavic's] attention; in a reversal of usual priorities, events often recede into the background". Vladislavic's observations become "autofictional" in that, where an ordinary observer would notice the commotion outside a shop where a theft has just occurred, the author focuses on "the dusty satin drapes, chrome-plated pedestals and hand-written price-tags" and "a wonderful brick, a model brick, with three round holes through it the size of one-rand coins, filled with chips of broken glass" (Vladislavic, 52).

Lenta notices the autobiographical features of Vladislavic's novel (the reader "learns things about his brother, father, partner, friends and former girlfriends, about the way he works, the books he has read and the films he has seen, his predilections, his 'experiments', and his reflections" (Lenta, 122)) and regrets the in-depth autobiographical explorations by the author, but fails to link the two and identify the texts as an autofiction.

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<sup>8</sup>Another example is provided on page 174 when Vladislavic discovers a metal pole never observed before: « I have been passing this thing for years without seeing it ».

Always at the heart of the cycles, pacing the itineraries, is the figure of the author himself: an indefatigable Everyman, kindly and wisely meandering through Johannesburg's perilous wilderness, seldom censorious. He is the same to everyone he meets, generally not bothering to tell us the colour of his characters, and his sympathies are boundless—he is even sorry for trees, when they are unjustly pollarded. Nature gets mentioned in passages dealing with gardens (9 passages) and water (7 passages).

Vladislavic integrates the storied history of the city fully into that of his own past, asserting at one point that 'the city' is no more than a mnemonic recourse to memory which exists in vivid multiform before his eyes. He is troubled, not just by the escalating divide in society, but also by the erasure of the past; damaged houses, embezzled statuary and white-washed native murals have power simply through negation. It is the author's hope that something of himself lives on in the city, that the city 'listens' to him and holds a recording of his incisive passage through its many streets just as his keen powers of observation are at the city's disposal.

Thematic shifts and discontinuities, reminiscent of autofictional fragmentation, "render reading an especially active experience, alerting the reader, as does Certeau, to the connection between walking through the city and the activity of reading: walking as a mode of reading the spatial environment; reading as a form of journeying" (Lenta 120). Another typical autofictional strategy is that of blurring the genres, of inscribing hybridity within the text. Without detailing the analysis, the inclusion of artworks like Sophie Galle and others to underscore the importance of various art forms, like a patchwork,

to show its transformative nature. The numerous examples mentioned above are exemplary of the selective auto-portrait for which autofictional authors are known<sup>9</sup>. Notions of individualism, introspection, a deeper quest for the Self are all underlying the top layer of the textual representations. One version of the Self that is portrayed is the artistic Self: here the metatextual, metafictional, literary consciousness of Ivan Vladislavic's artistic sensibility shapes his text. The 138 texts included in this volume mimic, in a certain way, randomness, yet they are aesthetically structured and combined in a textual architecture; this combination of characteristics emphasizing reality on the one hand and fiction on the other are typical of autofiction. As a non-typical tourist, the author-narrator-main character describes a postmodern alienated metropolis. Likened to Guy Debord's concept of *détournement*, autofiction, the collage-like literary genre, has unsettled the notion of autobiography in *Portrait with Keys*.

## Conclusion

Vladislavic's work reflects on the changing urban space of Johannesburg and calls attention to fiction as a kind of built structure in itself, a form of metaphorical architecture haunted by a violent past but possibly capable of encouraging civic and personal renewal of anyone in search of a 'second' nature.

Vladislavic acknowledges in an interview that he is conscious of moving in both "the literary world and the art world" (Miller 123), and that art has "evolved into what I would say was my major interest, outside books" (120). The implication is that Vladislavic's writing career has developed in relation to a mobile disciplinary affiliation, and that this has enabled his imagination to write across

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<sup>9</sup>The importance of the "blanks" on the visual quality of the text needs to be further analysed.

visual and verbal worlds. And yet books, the product of the world of writing, continue to constitute the pre-eminent focus of his professional and creative attention. He makes a living in books, even lives to an extent inside books, although perhaps not by the book, and his interest in art is conveyed to his readers through the art of the book. As Sally-Ann Murray rightly contents, the multiple-award winning writer Ivan Vladislavic is aptly placed in South African literature, affiliated at once with the old and the new:

His reputation, premised on the extraordinarily skilful language and style of his prose<sup>10</sup>, nudges that of the eminent literary old guard, an influential “white quartet” of Coetzee, Gordimer, Brink and Breytenbach (Kellas, 2004), but nor is it unusual, either, to find Vladislavic’s name invoked in the diverse company of prestigious ‘newer’ (if not necessarily young(er) South African writers like ZakesMda, Marlene van Niekerk, Etienne van Heerden, and AntjieKrog.

The variation in literary coordinates brings about the decidedly ‘undecided’ position of Vladislavic’s writerly range. It clearly shows that the author toys with experimental literariness to escape both generic definition and canonical categorization.

Vladislavic states that his book is indebted to writers such as Herman Charles Bosman and Lionel Abrahams<sup>11</sup> who also tried to capture this “elusive metropolis” in words. Sarah Nuttall and AchilleMbembe (25) define this elusiveness thus:

Cities are subjectsen *fuite*. They always outpace the capacity of analysts to name them ... Johannesburg is an elusive metropolis because of the multiplicity of registers in which it is African (or perhaps not at all, or not enough); European (or perhaps not, or no longer), or even American (by virtue of its embeddedness in commodity exchange and its culture of consumption). (Nuttall & Mbembe, 25)

What emerges from *Portrait with Keys*, however, is the impossibility of giving an overview of the city. Vladislavic’s account complements other post-apartheid narratives written from the view of black South Africans such as Mphe’s *Welcome to our Hillbrow* in a convincing aesthetic way. Subjectivity characterizes all of these post-apartheid narratives which have to be read together in order to re-imagine a constantly evolving city. Vladislavic’s segmented text also generates an architecture of possibility through its *literary* structure. This elusiveness, the in-between, this hybridity of feeling and text are exemplary of today’s autofiction.

The everyday is thereby transformed, it becomes an autofictional element in that the “unperceived” becomes important “in the sense that we have always looked past it ... [it] is what we never see for the first time but can only see again, having always already seen it by an illusion that is constitutive of the everyday” (Blanchot 240). Another example is provided on page 174 when Vladislavic discovers a metal pole never observed before: “I have been passing this thing for years without seeing it”.

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<sup>10</sup>Felicity Wood vividly describes Vladislavic’s style as “a zany, bewildering realm, which is in part the South Africa we know, and also a surreal, disorderly landscape of the mind” (22).

<sup>11</sup>He further refers to other authors, such as Charles Dickens, Ray Bradbury, Louis Fehler, Elias Canetti, William Gaunt, Lillian Hellman, Ivan Turgenev, Franz Kafka and Victor Segalen.

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