

## Études littéraires africaines

# Unstable Orders : Dislocation as Metaphor and Allegory of Post-apartheid Transition in Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket*

Kudzayi Ngara



Number 38, 2014

L'Afrique du Sud et la littérature post-apartheid (1994-2014)  
South Africa and Post-Apartheid Literature (1994-2014)

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1028674ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1028674ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association pour l'Étude des Littératures africaines (APELA)

ISSN

0769-4563 (print)

2270-0374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Ngara, K. (2014). Unstable Orders : Dislocation as Metaphor and Allegory of Post-apartheid Transition in Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket*. *Études littéraires africaines*, (38), 55–67. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1028674ar>

Article abstract

Le roman de Ivan Vladislavić *The Restless Supermarket* a pour cadre Johannesburg, une ville qui subit aujourd'hui de profondes transformations sociales et politiques. En premier lieu, cet article évalue comment le personnage principal, Aubrey Tearle, homme aux vues rétrogrades et conservatrices, négocie la transition politique, en se concentrant sur les rapports qu'il entretient avec l'infrastructure sociale et physique dynamique de la ville, et les stratégies qu'il déploie pour se chercher une identité dans un contexte de fluidité. Dans ces circonstances, les notions de définition de soi sont d'abord examinées en interrogeant comment Johannesburg, et le quartier de Hillbrow en particulier, en tant que zones urbaines en voie de démocratisation, se définissent de manière opposée aux idées que Tearle se fait de l'ordre et des conventions en ayant recours au bizarre ou à l'incongru. En second lieu, je propose que l'invention, par Tearle, d'une ville imaginaire comme Alibia constitue une métaphore et une allégorie de l'ordre linguistique qui se délite rapidement au fur et à mesure que la ville se transforme. Cette fantaisie utopique est conçue pour contrecarrer l'impression de descente vers un chaos dystopique que l'émergence d'une ville post-apartheid représente pour lui. Mais Tearle comprend bientôt que, même dans ce monde allégorique, il est en définitive incapable d'imposer l'ordre qu'il souhaite ; il lui faut plutôt apprendre à découvrir comment entretenir des liens nouveaux avec la ville comme espace que l'on habite.

# UNSTABLE ORDERS : DISLOCATION AS METAPHOR AND ALLEGORY OF POST- APARTHEID TRANSITION IN IVAN VLADISLAVIĆ'S *THE RESTLESS SUPERMARKET*

## RÉSUMÉ

*Le roman de Ivan Vladislavić The Restless Supermarket a pour cadre Johannesburg, une ville qui subit aujourd'hui de profondes transformations sociales et politiques. En premier lieu, cet article évalue comment le personnage principal, Aubrey Tearle, homme aux vues rétrogrades et conservatrices, négocie la transition politique, en se concentrant sur les rapports qu'il entretient avec l'infrastructure sociale et physique dynamique de la ville, et les stratégies qu'il déploie pour se chercher une identité dans un contexte de fluidité. Dans ces circonstances, les notions de définition de soi sont d'abord examinées en interrogeant comment Johannesburg, et le quartier de Hillbrow en particulier, en tant que zones urbaines en voie de démocratisation, se définissent de manière opposée aux idées que Tearle se fait de l'ordre et des convenances en ayant recours au bizarre ou à l'incongru. En second lieu, je propose que l'invention, par Tearle, d'une ville imaginaire comme Alibia constitue une métaphore et une allégorie de l'ordre linguistique qui se délite rapidement au fur et à mesure que la ville se transforme. Cette fantaisie utopique est conçue pour contrecarrer l'impression de descente vers un chaos dystopique que l'émergence d'une ville post-apartheid représente pour lui. Mais Tearle comprend bientôt que, même dans ce monde allégorique, il est en définitive incapable d'imposer l'ordre qu'il souhaite ; il lui faut plutôt apprendre à découvrir comment entretenir des liens nouveaux avec la ville comme espace que l'on habite.*

\*

*The Restless Supermarket* is Ivan Vladislavić's second novel and in it the city attains a definable character, rather than remaining a faint nebulosity on the edges of memory and the imagination. The novel is set in Johannesburg's Hillbrow suburb and I will look at Aubrey Tearle, the central character and first-person narrator of the story, as a figure struggling with notions of self-definition as a subject in the context of a democratising city<sup>1</sup> that has a growing global outlook and influence. The city is also a magnet for migrants who,

---

<sup>1</sup> Democratising in the qualified sense that Johannesburg is a city in a society that is undergoing social and political transformation as a result of the end of legislated apartheid. The intricacies of the realities of the changes mean that such democratisation is not equally or universally spatialised across the city.

in Tearle's estimation, contribute to the disruption of the established order he so highly values. A large proportion of the less well-heeled (especially African) migrants into South Africa over the last few decades have used Hillbrow as their first port-of-call and springboard into the rest of the country. This has contributed to the hastening of what Saskia Sassen, a Dutch sociologist credited with coining the term « global city », has described as the « peripheralization at the center of major cities »<sup>2</sup>. Hillbrow exemplifies the development of such inner-city zones of deprivation next to the commercial hub of the city, which ultimately leads to a form of capital flight<sup>3</sup> from the centre to new edge cities like Sandton in Johannesburg. As Jennifer Robinson has usefully observed, for many the history of Hillbrow captures well the complex trajectories of utopian hopefulness and dystopian despair, as it moved from an all-white neighbourhood of high-rise modernism to a pre-dominantly black neighbourhood with declining infrastructure and poorly maintained apartment blocks<sup>4</sup>.

For Tearle the social and economic deterioration of the inner city, epitomised in Hillbrow, is reflected in what he judges to be a concomitant slippage in the standards of the English language. In his article on the work of Vladislavić as an editor, Fred de Vries succinctly sums up the notion that Aubrey Tearle's « use of language and his command of English define the man » because « his superiority, his resentment, his nostalgia, his class, his style, his longing, his belonging, everything is contained in his language »<sup>5</sup>. The metaphor of linguistic order is central to Tearle's method of observing the city, as well as to how he relates to other characters and the city itself as lived-in space. It is in this light that I examine how he uses language, which is a familiar cultural artefact, and the allegory of the imagi-

---

<sup>2</sup> SASSEN (Saskia), « A New Geography of Centers and Margins : Summary and Implications », in : LEGATES (Richard T.) & STOUT (Frederic), eds., *The City Reader*. London : Routledge, 1996, 532 p. ; p. 70-74 ; p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> FISHMAN (Robert), « Megalopolis Unbound », *Wilson Quarterly Review*, vol. 14, n°1, 1990, p. 25-44 ; p. 27. Fishman describes capital flight as a state whereby « the peripheries have replaced the urban cores as the heartlands of our civilisation ».

<sup>4</sup> ROBINSON (Jennifer), « Living in Dystopia : Past, Present and Future in Contemporary African Cities » [Seminar Paper presented at the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, August 2009], in : PRAKASH (Gyan), ed., *Noir Urbanisms : Dystopic Images of the Modern City*. Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 187-217.

<sup>5</sup> DE VRIES (Fred), « Lost in Translation : A Personal Reflection on Ivan Vladislavić as an Editor », *Scrutiny2*, vol. 11, n°2, 2006 ; p. 101-105 ; p. 104.

nary city of Alibia to try to impose his sense of order on what he feels to be a deteriorating Johannesburg.

### **The Uncanny – Re-imagining the ordinary**

In his collection of essays *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, the South African cultural and literary critic, Njabulo Ndebele, has advocated for what he terms the rediscovery of the ordinary in South African literature<sup>6</sup>. In *The Restless Supermarket* Ivan Vladislavić goes beyond such a gesture by, in fact, making the ordinary into the un-ordinary. Among other facets, the author's Johannesburg is marked by the presence of the uncanny, spectacles that suddenly appear on the streets but also go some way in defining the unpredictable nature of the city. I use uncanny here to approximate a perception of the often playfully strange sense of wondrous coincidence and accidental juxtaposition. I am interested in the manner in which characters seem to willingly write themselves into the postcolonial cityscape as well as how the author deploys the uncanny, the unfamiliar, and uses spectacle to represent the physical and psychic fissures and openings of the city of Johannesburg in general and Hillbrow particularly. Through using situations of the uncanny, different identities are performed or dramatized and spatialized (as in made specific to or characteristic to of particular locales) across the city or urban space. The temporal nature of the city is to be found in terms of the uncanny presences and behaviour of some of the characters in the novel, *The Restless Supermarket*; in the manner in which various individuals locate themselves, walk and see the city; in the representational practices that define their individual identity, sense of self and subjectivities, and in the quest for physical and material certainty through an ephemeral linguistic order.

As an illustration of the points above, the dramatic opening lines of *The Restless Supermarket* feature the strange and somewhat unset-

---

<sup>6</sup> NDEBELE (Njabulo), *Rediscovery of the Ordinary : Essays on South African Literature and Culture*. Scottsville : University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2006, 184 p. This is a collection of essays which were first published in the 1980s. The first two essays in particular – « Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction » (p. 17-40) and « The Rediscovery of the Ordinary : Some New Writings in South Africa » (p. 41-59) – focus on what he describes as the « inadequacies [of] the modes of story-telling », which inadequacies arise from preoccupation with the « surface » as opposed to the « process » of « rediscovering the ordinary and the creative ». For Ndebele the latter process involves, for example, the development of « independent narrative » or « plot line[s] » instead of an over-reliance on considerations of the grand narratives of nationalism and apartheid.

tling sight of a man in a pinstriped suit having sex with a pink elephant :

A salesman buggering a pink elephant (excuse my Bulgarian). Not a sight one sees every day, even on the streets of Johannesburg – the Golden City as it were, Egoli as it are, to quote my pal Wessels, the last of the barnacles (*RS*, p. 3<sup>7</sup>).

Beyond the connections drawn between « ethnic and linguistic “impurity” » as « symptoms of cultural “mixing” » that Tearle associates with « decline »<sup>8</sup> one could also suggest that this sarcasm may point to the deterioration in social and linguistic standards that so fixate him. This blurring of borders is partially responsible for the creation of what I term an uncanny effect, especially in the reader’s mind, in that the « familiar » sexual act has been projected onto a space in which the real is inseparable from the unreal. Beyond this, recognition of the coded signs and successful navigation of the labyrinth all add to the effect of the uncanny, both in terms of how the characters in the novel experience the imagined city as well as how the reader’s conceptions are shaped. The excerpt above is also interesting on several other counts, for instance Tearle’s love for wordplay as evidenced in the use of « excuse my *Bulgarian* » where the commonplace phrase is « excuse my French »<sup>9</sup>. While the word Bulgarian in this context plays on the conjugated verb « buggering », it also reveals the narrator’s disdain for the Eastern European migrants into Johannesburg<sup>10</sup>, a disdain that is dealt with in greater detail in the later sections of the novel. The migrants are equated with vulgarity and the symbolic buggering or bastardising of the English language.

---

<sup>7</sup> VLADISLAVIĆ (Ivan), *The Restless Supermarket* [2001]. Cape Town : David Philip, 2006, 339 p. ; p. 3. Hereafter, page references to quotations from the text *The Restless Supermarket* shall be prefixed with the abbreviation *RS*. I am using the 2006 imprint, which has different pagination from the 2001 edition.

<sup>8</sup> CHAROS (Caitlin), « “The End of an Error” : Transition and “Post-apartheid Play” in Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket* », *Safundi*, vol. 9, n°1, 2008, p. 23-38 ; p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> KNECHT (Stacy), « Interview with Ivan Vladislavić », in : *The Ledge* : <http://www.theledge.com/flash/ledge.php?conversation=47&lan=UK> ; available online 2005, accessed on 22 June 2011. In conversation with Knecht Vladislavić notes how even before the influx of black people, Hillbrow « was always a place that a lot of newcomers to Johannesburg moved through ».

Johannesburg, the imagined city, is also a place of contrasts and uncanny juxtapositions. In Mpe's *Welcome To Our Hillbrow*<sup>11</sup> such dramatic representations of distinction can take the form, for instance, of the spatial location of two buildings with very dissimilar functions in very close proximity. Hence we have the Jabula Ebusiku shebeen<sup>12</sup> sharing a fence or wall with the Universal Kingdom of God church, between which the narrator wryly remarks that there is a competition for the spiritual attention of the Hillbrow residents. The presence of the shebeen in the inner city exemplifies both how the township has, in the sense of physical and social infrastructure, come to the city, and also how the demarcations of space that apartheid has attempted to legislate have become porous. In Vladislavić's imagined Hillbrow in *The Restless Supermarket*, the relative opulence of the Chelsea Hotel and even the narrator's favoured haunt of Café Europa are in marked contrast to the poverty and deprivation of the beggars and street-people like the Queen of Sheba. Such cleavages in the social structure of the city reflect on how the lived experience of a metropolitan urbanity such as in Johannesburg is fragmented. In *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* the narrator, at times, resorts to the use of the device of a stream of consciousness to relate the sensual, fragmentary reality of the city because of the multitudinous stimuli.

The content of the quotation cited in the preceding paragraph further points to the blurring of boundaries, moral and social, that has become a hallmark of the postcolonial and post-apartheid urban space of Johannesburg in the process of transformation. For the sake of clarity about my use of these two terms at this juncture and later, it is necessary to consider the following. The terms *post-apartheid* and *postcolonial* are quite problematic and are not read here as meaning definitive breaks with the past, as the periodicity implied in « post » would seem to suggest, and Tearle is tellingly unable to exemplify either of these categories. Christopher Warnes (2000)<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> MPE (Phaswane), *Welcome to our Hillbrow*. Pietermaritzburg : University of Natal Press, 2001, 124 p.

<sup>12</sup> Originally a type of illegal liquor outlet that developed in the black townships at the time of segregation, increasingly many shebeens are now licensed and form part of the regular fare on some tourist routes in the major cities of South Africa. *Jabula Ebusiku* can be literally translated as « enjoy the night ».

<sup>13</sup> WARNES (Christopher), « The Making And Unmaking Of History In Ivan Vladislavić's *Propaganda By Monuments and Other Stories* », *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 46, n°1, 2000, p. 67-89.

and Ato Quayson (2000)<sup>14</sup> have, among others, detailed the ambiguities that generally characterise the genre of postcolonial writing in this respect but, for the present, suffice it to say that when used together, the postcolonial and the urban or metropolitan represent a discursive narrative and terrain – a time and space continuum – in which the individual subject performs his or her identity in the process of becoming or being. Johannesburg, as a city, has become a site of transgressions but Tearle seems to suggest that what he is describing, in this case, may even be beyond some of the extremes that he has become accustomed to.

This blurring of borders is partially responsible for the creation of what I term an uncanny effect, especially in the reader's mind, in that the familiar sexual act has been projected onto a space in which the real is inseparable from the unreal.

The pink elephant is in reality a fibreglass mascot for the « Jumbo Liquor Market »<sup>15</sup> that is chained to a parking metre outside the premises, also a regular haunt for the narrator's closest acquaintance, Wessels. Such mascots have become part of the everyday experience of the city, especially through the growth of a commercialised consumer culture, although this one may have a more localised frame of reference and recognition, unlike global signifiers like Ronald McDonald. In this light, Shane Graham has postulated that the novel « reveals an awareness of consumer capitalism as a force that profoundly shapes perceptions and uses of space, place and time »<sup>16</sup>. This mascot is transformed from its everyday significance by the act of an individual man directing his desire towards it. Even the normally taciturn Aubrey Tearle, who « has come to expect undignified behaviour as a matter of course » (*RS*, p. 3) is shocked. This in spite of the fact that living in the city in such proximity to total strangers has, in Georg Simmel's formulation, the effect of producing what he describes as the « blasé attitude » or posture<sup>17</sup>. The city is a place where one can expect to encounter the unusual,

---

<sup>14</sup> QUAYSON (Ato), *Postcolonialism : Theory, Practice or Process ?* Cambridge : Polity Press, 2000, 216 p.

<sup>15</sup> Jumbo Liquor Market is a franchise chain of liquor stores extending across South Africa's major urban centres, with each branch displaying such a mascot. The mascots are about the size of baby elephants.

<sup>16</sup> GRAHAM (Shane), « Memory, memorialisation and the transformation of Johannesburg : Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* and *Propaganda by Monuments* », *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 53, n°1, 2007, p. 70-97 ; p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> SIMMEL (Georg), « The Metropolis and Mental Life », in : KASINITZ (Philip), ed., *Metropolis. Center and Symbol of Our Times*. New York : New York University Press, 1995, 486 p. ; p. 30-45 ; p. 35.

but here even a hardened Johannesburger like Tearle is unsettled by the sight, notwithstanding his general demeanour of aloofness and unconcern or seeming *laissez-faire* with the private matters of his « friends »<sup>18</sup> and the people around him. Louis Wirth expands on the theme of the blasé outlook by framing it as a defensive mechanism rather than the result of overstimulation :

The contacts of the city may indeed be face to face, but they are nevertheless impersonal, superficial, transitory and segmental. The reserve, the indifference, and the blasé outlook which urbanites manifest in their relationships may thus be regarded as devices for immunising themselves against the personal claims and expectations of others<sup>19</sup>.

Wirth's articulation above also best explains the way in which private space is framed in the novel, especially with reference to Tearle, whose residential address none of his friends seems to know. In the incident concerning Darryl and the pink elephant mascot the narrator stops to stare, whilst expressing at the same time the contradictory thought that « [a] lifetime of practice » as a proof-reader had turned him « into one of the world's most shameless scrutineers » (*RS*, p. 3). He stares because of the scale of the shock, because of this aberration elicits. Displaying some elements of the *flâneur* – as an idler or gentleman stroller – the retired Aubrey Tearle now has all the time in the world to indulge his gaze. The gaze in this case is, however, not uni-directional because it can be reflected back on himself as the original watcher. An example of this is the narrator's own surprisingly self-critical and candid admission that his description of Darryl as a salesman is an act of labelling based on the stereotype of salesmen wearing pinstripe suits. Tearle reveals some of his own presumptions and prejudices, which he euphemistically describes as « [o]ld-fashioned associations » (*RS*, p. 3).

As the crowd continues to gather, Darryl opens « one eye to gauge the response of his growing audience » (*RS*, p. 5) and the gaze is returned, now turned upon the original viewers. It is Darryl who now evaluates the reactions of the watchers while at the level of morality his actions constitute a challenge to the social lines drawn

---

<sup>18</sup> Single quotation marks are used for « friends » to emphasise the fact that the true nature of the relationship between Aubrey Tearle and his circle of acquaintances does not extend to the levels of social intimacy implied by the term.

<sup>19</sup> WIRTH (Louis), « Urbanism as a Way of Life », *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 44, n°1, 1938, p. 1-24 ; p. 12.



to demarcate what is acceptable behaviour and what is not. The overall effect of Darryl's performance is that in the postcolonial metropolis, the Rabelaisian carnival in Bakhtinian terms, which necessarily includes a festival of the grotesque, has moved from the fields beyond the margins of the city and elements of it are now found closer to the centre. In some respects the spectacle has become part of the everyday. Performance is not reserved for the festival only but becomes part of the street-level intimations of identity<sup>20</sup>.

Related to the use that Vladislavić makes of the uncanny, or of representing everyday situations in ways which make them appear sometimes strange and unreal, television and TV news is another form of spectacle utilised by the writer as means to re-imagine and represent the postcolonial city. However, Tearle finds this to be a completely unedifying medium. The broadcast of the CODESA<sup>21</sup> proceedings leaves him cold :

CODESA this and CODESA that. The country was disappearing behind a cloud of acronyms. As for the decor at the « World Trade Centre »<sup>22</sup> – how could one expect proper political decisions to be made in those dreadful surroundings ? The place looked like a brothel (RS, p. 13).

Throughout the story Tearle exudes a sense that the decline of what he refers to as « standards » in Hillbrow and Johannesburg generally has coincided with the moment of democracy. In stark contrast to his lexicographical skills, Tearle displays a distinct inability to gauge history and it seems to pass imperceptibly before his unconvinced eyes. The almost daily marches through the centre of Johannesburg that are now held peacefully without inviting the customary violent wrath of the authorities are the street-level manifestations of the fluidity of the political ground. The CODESA talks highlight the inevitability of change in the apartheid city, change

---

<sup>20</sup> MOELE (Kgebetli), *Room 207*. Cape Town : Kwela Books, 2006, 238 p. Moele's narrator in *Room 207* recounts how he nonchalantly walks naked from his girlfriend's flat in Hillbrow to his shared lodgings in another block one morning, and in the process makes a spectacle of himself.

<sup>21</sup> The Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) was a series of meetings after the unbanning of the South African liberation struggle movements like the ANC and the release from prison of Nelson Mandela in 1990 that led to a negotiated transition to democracy, culminating in the election of the iconic Mandela as president in 1994.

<sup>22</sup> The South African version, located in Kempton Park, Johannesburg.

which is evident to Aubrey Tearle, but that he appears unwilling or unable, initially, to deal with.

### Alibia and the Allegory of (Linguistic) Order

Unable to contend with nor comprehend the socio-political reality that is unfurling before his very eyes, Aubrey Tearle resorts to escapism and the utopian fantasy of Alibia, which is the subject of the middle section of the novel. Language and linguistic order, or what literary critic Irikidzayi Manase refers to as the « linguistic rationality » through which the protagonist « imagines that his city can be preserved from collapse »<sup>23</sup>, is closely associated with how Tearle defines his « self »<sup>24</sup> but the irony is that in his digging up the etymological roots of words, for example, he instantiates the ephemerality of meaning, and of being. In his quest for the essence of words, he discovers troubling, multiple significations. In the end, Aubrey Fluxman (Tearle's adopted pseudonym in the fantasy) and his colleagues, who are the guardians of the imagined city of Alibia and are armed with proofreading tools such as pencils and erasers, recognise the futility of religiously insisting on a particular order of space. They realise that the ground is constantly shifting beneath them and that the city is in flux. Tearle's « Proofreaders' Derby » which he intended as a sort of ode to his craft, remains no more than an exercise in intellectual *flânerie*. Alibia is a fiction within a fiction, a version of the famed Chinese boxes (that seem to endlessly fold one over the other) or the *mise-en-abyme* effect of Russian dolls, and serves to illustrate the self-reflexive aspects of postcolonial writing generally, and Ivan Vladislavić's oeuvre particularly.

An interesting proposition is to read Alibia, as a utopian idyll, through allegorical reference to Prospero's island in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The island functions, in this interpreta-

---

<sup>23</sup> MANASE (Irikidzayi), « Johannesburg During the Transition in Vladislavić's "The WHITES ONLY Bench" and *The Restless Supermarket* », *English Academy Review*, vol. 26, n°1, 2009, p. 53-61 ; p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> MARAIS (Mike), « Reading Against Race : J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Justin Cartwright's *White Lightning* and Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* », *Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 19, n°3, 2003, p. 271-289 ; p. 283. Mike Marais describes this process as the collapsing of « the distinction between [the] protagonist's linguistic proofreading and his social proofreading ». He is referring to the manner of Tearle detecting « error ». Similarly, Hegelsson concludes that the difference between « language » and « social reality » is collapsed — HEGELSSON (Stefan), « "Minor disorders" : Ivan Vladislavić and the devolution of South African English », *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 30, n°4, 2004, p. 777-787; p. 778.

tion, as both an elsewhere and a nowhere, a space over which Prospero can (presumably) exercise complete dominion and agency while Alibia is Tearle's fanciful incarnation of the ideal city and the ideal state of being. For Tearle such a state begins and ends with linguistic order. Prospero's vision in the play is undermined by the nascent claims to free will by the likes of Caliban, Gonzalo (who has his own fantasy of a « commonwealth [where] I would by contraries / Execute all things... »)<sup>25</sup> and even the gentle Ariel's dreams to be free. Similarly, Aubrey Tearle (or Aubrey Fluxman as he is portentously known in the Alibia narrative) is undone by the ructions that are inherent in his conflated vision of the unities between language, architecture, urban planning and culture. All of these are combined into a narrative of refinement and civilisation, Tearle's version of these in any case.

The section of the novel called « The Proofreader's Derby » is constructed as a stream of consciousness about the imagined physical manifestation of the city of Alibia, and reads in places like a magical realist text. In it, the ideas and collected corrigenda of Aubrey Tearle's post-retirement project – the Proofreader's Derby – transform into the assumed utopia of Alibia which serves as an alibi of the imagined city of Johannesburg, with Fluxman as a version or avatar of Tearle. The transmogrification of inanimate physical structures into organic forms that have an agency of their own has the same effect as the conflation of the mythical and the real in narratives such as Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*<sup>26</sup>, in which the dream-like state allows for perceptions of layers or dimensions of reality beyond the conventionally accepted paradigms. In this way the allegory of Alibia works to effect the « suspension of disbelief » in the reader, but more importantly, it also undermines the notion of totalising narratives (as maps and plans are) by exposing the flows that run through and flaws that exist in the ideological and discursive frameworks. The spontaneous uprooting and self-displacement of the buildings of the imagined city of Alibia undercut the logic of city-planning and, by extension, the enforcement of order by Aubrey Fluxman and the other proofreaders whose duty it is to maintain everything in its given place. Linguistic order is, in the

---

<sup>25</sup> SHAKESPEARE (William), *The Tempest*. Cambridge School Shakespeare Edition. Cambridge : University of Cambridge Press, 1995, p. 172 ; Act 2, Scene 1, Lines 42-43 ; p. 53

<sup>26</sup> TUTUOLA (Amos), *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. London : Faber and Faber, 1961, 125 p.

Tearle / Fluxman imaginary, the lynchpin from which social order is supposed to flow.

In a scene resembling one of the opening movements in *The Tempest*, Fluxman retrieves a body from the waters off the shore, probably a sailor drowned in the capsizing of a vessel called the « Muscovy ». When he lands the body on dry ground he is little prepared for what he sees :

He was prepared for savaged flesh, for puncture holes and lacerations, but not for the chaos that met his practised eye [...] A cacophony of categories, a jumble of kinds, an elemental disorder, wanton and fatal (RS, p. 209-210).

The body has, like the supposedly-drowned King Alonso, undergone a sea-change but instead of changing into « something rich and strange »<sup>27</sup> it is now a « cacophony of categories ». All notions of anatomical unity and species-specific physiological taxonomy are destabilised in the description of this body, which is part-machine, part-man, part-animal and part-bird. It is a corpse from a science-fiction mortuary and Fluxman, so set in his perceptions of reality, is unable to make sense of it.

Similarly « the last official street guide to Alibia » (RS, p. 210) is in disarray and formerly unified neighbourhoods are barely recognisable in the shambles of chunks of space that are strewn haphazardly across the map. The map itself, which to Fluxman is the symbol of ultimate truth and order, seemingly rebels and he has to take « his alpenstock from the stand at the door and [go] out into the disjointed city » to try and physically restore the symmetry of the place (RS, p. 210). Alibia is a « disjointed city » and coming apart at the seams because the previously « neat and orderly rows of houses » (RS, p. 210) and buildings have been planned on a false premise and conception of organisation and propriety. In the midst of the chaos and carnage Fluxman re-imagines the order and perfection of the old boulevards where everything was in place and « so idiomatically proper, that tears started to his eyes » (RS, p. 215). Displaying elements of the *flâneur*, he falls in with « the strollers » but his pleasure is tempered by the knowledge that « [i]n these troubled times, there was no activity more fraught with danger than aimlessly wandering in the streets » (RS, p. 210). In a way, this fear of a new possibility (a fear of change and the new) makes him resort to what is known and that comfortable reality is his time in the

---

<sup>27</sup> SHAKESPEARE (W.), *The Tempest*, *op. cit.*, p. 53 ; Act 1, Scene 2, Line 401.

eponymously titled Proofreaders' Society of Alibia<sup>28</sup>, whose mandate was to keep order and shape to the city. This resort by Fluxman to a historical period of some certainty echoes Tearle's reminiscence of the glory days of Café Europa and Hillbrow in the main narrative. However, at the climax of the dislocation of the city, all the proofreaders are extended almost beyond their bearing as all kinds of categorisations, from the library catalogue to the maps of the city, are subject to spontaneous deconstruction. The quest to re-order the city begins initially with the Restless Supermarket, which is first removed to a place outside the city where the restorative work can be done safely. A key consideration in the enterprise is recognition of adaptability, that is, the shape and form of the city needs to be adaptable to new social realities :

Experience taught them that nothing is perfect. They reconciled themselves to the errors of judgement and perception that beset the best-planned operations.[...] In time everything was returned to its proper place, which sometimes was not the place it had started out, but the place it deserved to end (RS, p. 252-3).

The relief takes the form of momentary respite because restoring order and righting – read as writing – the wrongs becomes a daily task as « Alibia basked in its imperfect glory » (RS, p. 253). In *The Tempest*, Prospero's obsessive pursuit of order and control is in the end conquered by the random vicissitudes of romantic love when his daughter, Miranda, falls in love with Ferdinand and avails them all an opportunity to engage in new sets of relations and a return to Naples. Unlike Prospero who « abjure[s] » his « rough magic »<sup>29</sup> before setting sail, Fluxman still furtively lingers to sweep « the last of the delenda up from the gutters » (RS, p. 253) before getting on the boat and dumping them in the lake. However, the acceptance of « one error in five pages » is an acknowledgement of the impossibility of perfection. In the manner described by the literary theoretician Stuart Hall, all categories undergo a unique form of erasure in which they are not completely obliterated, but are merely altered in

---

<sup>28</sup> The Society hold their meetings in a cubicle in the Café Europa, thus extending the metaphor of the mirror-within-a-mirror in which an image is endlessly reflected. A similar technique is deployed in Vladislavić's *The Exploded View* (in « Villa Toscana ») where a television image is replicated in itself in incrementally smaller scales. Vladislavić (I.), *The Exploded View*. Johannesburg : Random House, 2004, 201 p. ; p. 3-46.

<sup>29</sup> SHAKESPEARE (W.), *The Tempest*, *op. cit.*, p. 127 ; Act 5, Scene 1, Line 50.

form such that they are thought of and utilised in new ways<sup>30</sup>. These are the new ways of understanding the postcolonial city that the narrator (in his dual manifestations as Tearle or Fluxman) seems slow to learn. Linguistic order, as an organisational paradigm, is on its own no longer adequate to make sense of the emerging city.

## Conclusion

By analysing the device of the uncanny or spectacle, as well as the allegorical trope of linguistic order, the emerging postcolonial city has been shown to be fraught in terms of both social infrastructure, as well as notions of identity. The thread that holds together all the concepts that have been highlighted is that of the implausibility of a perpetual constant in terms of language and identity, and therefore of space and its meaning.

The beginnings of political transformation of the formerly balkanised city are seen to undermine even the most conservative ideas about the literal and figurative appropriation of space in the city, and Aubrey Tearle is seen walking near the end with a coloured girl Shirleine, making very tentative steps towards a understanding of the Other, and without trying to impose his sense of order on his world. This little act on its own is enough to negate or dispel any notions of the postcolonial city of Johannesburg as an arena of endless dystopia. By examining the juxtaposition of the nervous, cosmopolitan vitality of the city with the fraught questions of identities, citizenship and belonging, the article also mapped a sense of the city as the site of a metaphorical flux in which individual characters have a tenuous hold on the physical and social spaces that they have appropriated as their own.

■ Kudzayi Ngara

---

<sup>30</sup> HALL (Stuart), « Introduction : Who Needs "Identity" ? », in : HALL (Stuart) & DU GAY (Paul), eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London : Sage, 1996, 198 p. ; p. 1-17 ; p. 1.