The Wall as Signifier in Ivan Vladislavić’s Works

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In Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the wall is a made-up sign to ‘signify’ both a barrier and a bridge. It works as an obstacle yet also as a way for communication to take place; it separates and somehow unites Pyramus and Thisbe, the two mythical lovers of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* whose story is being retold by Shakespeare’s ‘rude mechanicals’ during the rehearsal of their play. In this essay, the transformative nature of the wall will be studied in relation to South African literature, particularly to the writings of Ivan Vladislavić. Indeed, the wall is a massive presence as an icon that works as

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a shifting and metamorphic signifier in South African literature and society, though here the wall tends to be a tool of separation rather than of union.

The wall is such a rooted icon in South African writing that it characterizes with remarkable continuity the history – and, consequently, the literature – of the country from its early colonial origins to its present post-apartheid condition. This study will focus on Ivan Vladislavić’s representations of the wall as a powerful symbol of the present-day urban context of Johannesburg. My analysis will take as a point of departure Sarah Nuttall’s assumption that recent South African urban narratives seem to explore “an emergent ethic of hospitality in the city.” Furthermore, the dialectic between hospitality and hostility will also be considered here, as it seems that the two concepts are respectively loosely translatable with reference to the categories formulated by Heidegger of “Mitsein,” or the capacity of being together, and “Dasein,” or the anguish of being thrown into the human condition of loneliness, self-alienation, and absence of communication with other human beings. Such Heideggerian terms will be connected with the icon of the wall as a signifier assuming a variety of significations in the South African context.

To begin with, the wall – quite conventionally – produces images of fortification. “Journal of a Wall,” for instance, is an eloquent prose fragment about the wall as signifier in Vladislavić’s work Missing Persons: Stories. This is a short narrative about a couple of newly arrived neighbours who, for no apparent reason, commit themselves to the construction of an anonymous, dull brick wall around their property and who, soon after the completion of the structure, put the property up for sale and move somewhere else. Despite the fact that the wall appears to them – albeit just for a moment – “not so much as a barrier between us, but as a meeting-point,” it soon becomes again, in the eyes of the first-person narrator, the high and sombre barricade it was meant to be.

Jurij Lotman has theorized, in his essay on culture, that space can be divided between an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ that establish the border between ‘us’ and ‘them’, or ‘here’ and ‘out there’. Vladislavić’s narrator perfectly translates Lotman’s theory: “The wall. They knew it from one side, I knew it from the other.” When he tries to establish contact while asking for some sugar, he is denied

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