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Visions of Tsafendas: Literary Biography and the Limits of "Research"

Hedley Twidle

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> This is just a glimpse of my Experiences in an Abnormal World. I intend writing a Book if I ever have the opportunity, but medical attention is what I need at present.

Demetrios Tsafendas, Letter from Pretoria Central Prison.

1.

I am sitting in the National Library, ordering up back issues of the *Sunday Times*, trying to find a particular paragraph which describes just how dysfunctional parliament became during the 20th year of South African democracy. There were many accounts of the chaotic sessions in the National Assembly just beyond the trees of Government Avenue; but I remembered this one in particular for the attention it paid to the physical gestures made by MPs as they baited each other in front of a public that was by turns amused and appalled.

Traced back to its root, the word "Parliament" means speaking. The Old French etymology is preserved in the Afrikaans spelling on signs in Cape Town's Company Gardens: Parlement. But in South Africa, 2014 was the year of "unparliamentary language." It began with a brilliantly effective piece of political theater: new political party the Economic Freedom Fighters being sworn in while wearing red laborers' overalls (men) and red domestic worker aprons (women). Since then, the EFF have set about jamming the language of the National Assembly in all registers, with little patience for verbal formulae and niceties inherited from abroad.

In finding out more about what is and is not unparliamentary, I have learned that different assemblies throughout the world have different approaches to the matter. Suggestions of dishonor or intentional dishonesty are generally prohibited. Some nations go so far as to list specific phrases that should never be used again, so forming a rich archive of political insult. "Ringmaster," "dirty little rat," and

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"bucket of shit" are expressly disallowed by the Indian parliament, where a 2012 list of banned terms runs to over ten thousand entries. Canada has outlawed "evil genius" (1962) and "trained seal" (1961), among many others. Then, there are euphemisms like "gross terminological inexactitude" or "being economical with the truth," coined in Westminster to avoid outright accusations of lying, where the ability to insult a political opponent within the bounds of decorum unfolds as a kind of gentleman's game.

It is precisely such games that the EFF and other parties showed themselves increasingly unwilling to play, or else found ways of subverting, often through non-verbal means. A rich language of gesture has by now evolved in our National Assembly, which is apt, given that (in literal terms) the phrase "unparliamentary language" suggests not just the unspeakable, but also the unspeaking and unspoken.

The "showerhead," an old favorite, has often been used to taunt President Jacob Zuma. But new forms have also emerged: for painting nails, for spy satellites, and for airplanes. The Democratic Alliance MP David Maynier has maintained outstretched arms whenever Public Service Minister Lindiwe Sisulu is speaking: a protest against her allegedly spending R11 million on luxury jet travel. The EFF have taken to "conducting" in front of the ANC MPs, whom they dismissively refer to as "the choir." The middle finger has made its appearance, as raised by Chief Whip Floyd Shivambu to Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa. "The insult by a childish EFF MP who pointed the Speaker with a middle finger … must," the South African Communist Party insisted in a statement of 17 September, "be addressed as a matter of urgency."

On Thursday, 13 November, EFF MP Ngwanamakwetle Mashabela digressed from a speech on hydroelectric power to accuse President Zuma of being (as if in some kind of magical realist narrative by Amos Tutuola or Ben Okri) "The Greatest Thief in the World." In the footage of the encounter, the Speaker immediately requests that the claim be withdrawn, but the Honorable Mashabela does not budge. The stand-off goes on for several minutes:

Speaker:	Honorable Member, I must ask you to withdraw that statement.
Mashabela:	I can't withdraw, Chair. Zuma is a criminal. Zuma is a thief.
Speaker:	Honorable Member…
Mashabela:	We all know it. The world knows it. He is the greatest thief in the world. Chair, I can't withdraw.

Shortly afterwards, riot police enter the chamber and the camera feed is shut off, with Mashabela's last audible words being: "I don't want to be touched."

The disrupted State of the Nation address that began 2015 would bring still more chaotic scenes and heavy-handed tactics. But it is worth pausing to note the historical significance of 13 November 2014. As several newspapers remarked, it was the first time that police had entered Parliament since the assassination of apartheid Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, almost fifty years before.

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2.

What are the most important or influential works of non-fiction in South African literary history? When I ask people, they will normally say Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa*, Steve Biko's *I Write What I Like,* and Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*. Some might suggest the various literary responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*, perhaps—or even the TRC Final Report itself: that vast release of narrative into the public domain.

I want to put forward another, lesser known work for inclusion: the *Report of the Commission of Enquiry Into the Circumstances of the Death of the Late Dr. the Honorable Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd*, to give the full title on its blue manila cover. In Chapter II, Section D, Paragraph 10, it renders the crux of its investigation, when at 14:10 on 6 September 1966, a parliamentary messenger named Demetrios Tsafendas emerged from deepest obscurity to make his mark, four marks to be precise, on South African history:

> When Tsafendas reached Dr. Verwoerd's bench, he drew the dagger, leaning over Dr. Verwoerd as though he wanted to say something to him, and then gave Dr. Verwoerd the first stab in his chest on the left side. Dr. Verwoerd raised his hands as if to ward him off, and Tsafendas dealt him three more stabs before several Members of Parliament rushed to Dr. Verwoerd's aid and overpowered Tsafendas. (14)

The father of apartheid struck down at the height of his power by a "mad Greek," a schizophrenic drifter who believed his body to be parasitized and was (so the story goes) acting on instructions from a tapeworm inside his gut. It is one of the strangest facts in South African history. It is also, of course, a kind of fiction.

For a certain generation, the death of Verwoerd marked an indelible date. People remember where they were that day; it is referenced and refracted by memoirs and novels of the time. The assassin's name even passed into urban slang—to "tsafenda" someone was to assault them. The labored, slightly absurdist prose above—with its mixture of honorifics and bloody violence—points to the problem that the larger *Report* had to grapple with. How had so questionable a man as Demetrios Tsafendas come within such deadly proximity of power? And what exactly was the nature of his message?

Beyond the official account, a weave of anecdote and folk memory surrounds the event: that the assassin was rugby-tackled by Sports Minister Frankie Waring. That then Minister of Defense P. W. Botha had run across the floor to berate the members of the Liberal Party: he "shoved that famous finger in my face," recalled Helen Suzman, and shouted "Now we'll get you! It's you liberals! You did this!" When an elderly Tsafendas was interviewed by documentary maker Liza Key in Sterkfontein Hospital in 1996 (where he lived on into "the new South Africa"), he added another cryptic detail. Dressed in striped bathrobe and cowboy hat, he explains in a hoarse voice that the knife he bought that spring morning from City Guns had been coated with anti-rust solution: "Dr. Verwoerd died when the doctors tried to pull the dagger out … It was stuck … you understand. The solution

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stuck onto the flesh … and when they tried to pull it out, it caused a bigger wound and it killed him."

Almost fifty years later, the name Tsafendas has fallen out of national memory. It barely appears in the indexes of standard historical works, and when it does, the details of his life are often wrong. The entry of police into the National Assembly in 2014 allowed it to resurface only briefly, unexpectedly, reluctantly. Demetrios Tsafendas committed the most unparliamentary act in South African history, but his story remains somehow unspoken or unspeakable in our national narrative.

Naturally, the apartheid press and judiciary immediately went about de-politicizing the assassin, stripping his act of all significance. This was a "meaningless creature" who had led "a useless life" according to the presiding judge: "I can as little try a man who has not in the least the makings of a rational mind as I could try a dog or an inert implement" (*Report*, 11). While congratulating itself on due process, the legal establishment nonetheless found a loophole in order to punish the assassin. Once the absence of any political plot had been established, this "State President's prisoner" was shut away from public view. First on Robben Island, then in solitary confinement on Pretoria Central's death row for 23 years, in earshot of the gallows—a treatment of a mentally ill man that marks one of the regime's lesser known, but more vindictive human rights violations.

In his jagged prison memoir, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, Breyten Breytenbach recalls how Tsafendas ("Stefaans") would entertain the inmates with his "hoarse, urgent" renditions of the Afrikaans folksong "Sarie Marais": "He would be cheered wildly by everybody else in the prison—we were the world's most enthusiastic audience—and some aficionados would scream for an encore. But that was the extent of his contact with his fellowmen" (232). Interviewed in Key's documentary, the poet suggests that Tsafendas is a kind of obverse or shadow image to Mandela in South African history: one kept hidden away for so long, gradually fading from national consciousness; one becoming the most famous political prisoner in the world. Mandela incarnating a clear political program in every aspect of his being; Tsafendas remaining opaque to any single ideological reading—an unusable, unwanted figure within the narratives of struggle and liberation, or truth and reconciliation.

In *Long Walk to Freedom*, he is quickly written off as an "obscure white parliamentary messenger" (512). Mandela states flatly that the death of Verwoerd "did not yield us any pleasure," and moves quickly to establish the party line on the act: "Political assassination is not something I or the ANC ever supported. It is a primitive way of contending with an opponent" (512–3). But still, the messenger and his worm have compelled (or even obsessed) a range of artists and writers, many of whom have dealt with him in ways that are strange and surreal. So then what does it mean to read history when all you have is experimental or avant-garde forms? And also the reverse: What does it mean to work within the "archival grain" of official documents, reading them against or aslant their original intentions, looking for their fictions?

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3.

Interviewed by the *Paris Review* in 1993, Don DeLillo describes the immense research project that underlay *Libra*, his novelistic response to the killing of John F. Kennedy. Part of this entailed reading the 26-volume *Warren Report*, which he calls "the *Oxford English Dictionary* of the assassination and also the Joycean novel": a kind of ur-text for modern America. I feel something similar about the 1966 *Report* as it tries to account for life and times of Tsafendas, a man whose wanderings, as Henk van Woerden puts it in his slim, speculative 1998 biography *A Mouthful of Glass*, "stun the imagination" (72).

As the 1966 Commission of Enquiry discovered when it began its investigations, the movements of the man known variously as TSAFENDAS, TSAFENDIS, TSAFANDIS, TSAFENDOS, TSAFANDAKIS, TSAFANTAKIS, TSAFENDIKAS, STIFANOS, and CHIPENDIS could be tracked via "a litany of deportation orders and psychiatric reports," in the words of Key's 1997 submission to the TRC on Tsafendas's behalf. The trail of documents stretched across 25 countries, 13 ships, and 12 hospitals, leaving traces in secret police files ranging from General Salazar's PIDE in Portugal to Israel's Mossad. His shape-shifting name allowed him, eventually, to slip back into a country that had placed him on the stop-list (the so-called "black list") for his "communistic leanings," his "irregular attendance and loafing," his tendency to make outlandish political prophecies. "This country is not called Portugal," Tsafendas once proclaimed to onlookers in a Mozambiquan hotel:

> [I]t is called the United States of Mozambique, its flag is of a blue colour with a rainbow, that rainbow represents all the colours. We already have money and any day now this will come to an end because what is necessary is not be fooled into saying that we are Portuguese, because we are Africans. Long live our Country, the United States of Mozambique. (*Report*, 9)

The *Report* (which, like the archives of unparliamentary language, must preserve Tsafendas's words even as it tries to dismiss them) is then required to stage a rhetorical contest between this utter outlier and the immense bureaucratic machine of high apartheid—a machine that was revealed not as efficient but as porous, contradictory, and badly malfunctioning.

For contrary to Mandela's one-line dismissal, this was no albino terrorist. Tsafendas was not white; he was (in the *Report*'s twisted lexicon) "the illegitimate child of a non-White" (1). And if he was obscure, then he was, like J. M. Coetzee's holy fool Michael K, "so obscure as to be a prodigy" (142). Born in Mozambique to a woman of Swazi descent (a servant in the household of his father, a marine engineer of Cretan extraction), Tsafendas had nonetheless been classified "White" in the Union of South Africa. It was this official misreading that allowed a mentally troubled, paperless drifter to get a job in Parliament. The post of messenger carried the stigma of being menial labor, and so the authorities struggled to fill it according to the strictures of Verwoerdian job reservation. "I have to scour the streets, because nobody wants to do the humble work, under the humble name of messenger," the Chief Messenger Mr. Burger explained. Tsafendas had seemed, in

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fact, the best of the "loose—spineless applicants": "I have already lost all my good boys" (*Report*, 25).

So there is irony upon irony compacted into Tsafendas's unparliamentary act. Here was a mixed-race man in a job reserved for "Whites," and one in the process (the *Report* found) of applying for reclassification as "Coloured" to the same bureaucracy that had placed him on the so-called "black list." Within the very sanctum of apartheid law-making, Verwoerd had placed himself within reach of an aggrieved outsider through his own policies, fuelled by a belief that every human type could be read off the skin, and put in their place. How utterly it shows up the impossible machine that tried to parse the racial spectrum of southern Africa into different group identities, economies, and social functions—entrenching one version of difference by collapsing all other kinds.

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4.

As must be obvious by now, I have for a long time been tracking versions of Tsafendas, his life, and afterlives. Too interested perhaps, for the result is a large amount of extraneous material, of archival lumber, that cannot easily be fitted into the format of research paper. Research seminar, research cluster, research output. The word is almost a fetish within the contemporary academy—but what, I often wonder, does "research" actually mean in a discipline like literature? And what happens when a project overspills its bounds, exceeds any cost-benefit analysis, even begins infiltrating your dreams?

Tsafendas is often written off as a "freakish footnote" in the liberation story (Robins, 29). And yet, as I composed my more rigorous academic incarnation of this piece, the footnotes seemed to become where the real center of gravity lay. They began to expand uncontrollably, and in them clustered all the unquiet ghosts of far more interesting articles that I would never write. "The trivia is exceptional," writes DeLillo about trawling through "acres of FBI reports": "When I came across the dental records of Jack Ruby's mother I felt a surge of admiration. Did they really put this in?" But working in a different genre, I had to take it out. All the texture, anecdote, and unlikeliness were consigned to a paratextual apparatus that I then had to strip out at an editor's request, gutting the manuscript like a fish.

"Suppression prepares for overflow" wrote Coleridge in the margin of his *Hamlet*: another text of unquiet ghosts, of method, and (or in) madness. It is line that anticipates the whole of Freudian theory. So, here I am trying to salvage and work with the delicate bits of marginalia that had to be removed, and to explore some, let's call them "methodological problems" regarding Tsafendas's madness that I haven't been able to shake off. They are problems of over-investment and over-determination; of associations or insights too fragile or personal to exist in more public forms; of chance and fictive elements that persist within a supposedly documentary context; the "back end" of research, in a way, which is sometimes hard to talk about, but plays such a shaping role.

This is why I am drawn to a particular scene in Van Woerden's biography of Tsafendas—a biography which is also an autobiography—and why I began this essay in the National Library. The author describes going to the same place in the 1990s, and ordering up old newspapers from the time when he was growing up in South Africa, before he left the country in disgust as a young man (not long after the Verwoerd assassination). He is trying to grope his way back to that time, "scavenging and gathering material by instinct, basketsful of material, hoping that I might find a use for it all—though I could not imagine what that use might turn out to be" (27). Any researcher, I think, can relate to this kind of random prospecting, this archival uselessness.

He orders up a four months sampling of *Die Burger* from 1 January 1960 to the end of April: "one hundred and twenty days under Verwoerd's premiership, chosen more or less at random" in which the past unfolds "incoherently," in lurid caricatures and stereotypes:

> Again and again the ugliness of that period thrust itself into my consciousness: the stupidity, the lies, the violence, the censorship … the grotesquely obscene political and "immorality" trials, the Dutch Reformed dominees trapped in garages with their Coloured maids, the farmers spied on in the open veld with their female domestics and duly brought to reckoning before the courts. (27)

He has gone into the library trying to find refuge from a confusing 1990s present: a Cape Town in which he is mugged on the train, in which he sees a homeless man beating a homeless woman, in which onlookers ask "You like chocolate?" as he walks around town with a mixed-race companion. But the rising nausea of this archive fever forces him outside again, into the Company Gardens, and so the association with Verwoerd's assassination is (rather glibly) made: "So many important events had taken place in this precinct: demonstrations, marches, processions. Murder too" (28).

It is an odd and tenuous scene—but it gets at the unstable complex of motivations, both conscious and unconscious, that result in the production of a biographical "subject." It registers and tries to head off an over-investment in its own concerns, with all the problems that follow. At precisely this point, the autobiographical narrative is displaced by the appearance of the 1966 *Report*. Van Woerden describes going back to find it among the documents he has ordered up, a kind of deus ex machina which gives the germ of the book he is now writing, but then is immediately played down: "I paid my money and carried away a photocopy of the report in its entirety. I had no idea then how extensive and how revealing was the material about Tsafendas which I would find elsewhere" (28).

It may be worth mentioning that Van Woerden came to speak to a writing class that I was part of ten years ago, and gruffly disparaged the local variants of magical realism that were then in vogue: rainbow nation-ish revisitings of the South African past. We were perversely lucky, he said, to live in a place so full of unprocessed narrative (it was the time of the Sizzler's murders: a still unexplained massacre of nine men in a Sea Point massage parlor). He claimed that Philip Roth

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could have been talking about Cape Town when he made the 1961 pronouncement that the fiction writer "lies helpless before what he knows he will read in tomorrow's newspaper": "The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures daily that are the envy of any novelist" (222).

It may also be worth mentioning how sad it seemed that Van Woerden—this painter who had written such a haunting biography, who seemed poised to become a world writer, whose name read like a scrambled version of the fellow Hollander he was trying to exorcize: Verwoerd—had died of a heart attack in an American hotel room just a few years later.

5.

So the first, most obvious problem is that of excess: familiar to anyone editing down a draft and wondering why you have over-shot the word limit so badly, have carried on with this kind of over-writing *even while knowing* that what you are writing will be cut in the final analysis, that you are writing under a suspended sentence—and yet you keep on writing.

In the case of Tsafendas, though, the excess was excessive: the sheer incomprehensibility and mobility of his life proves a challenge for any form. For he too was someone who kept on writing: to state authorities, all through his wandering years, asking for a permit back to South Africa: "Will you please consider the above & let me return to my home, & to the girl I was brought up with, to whom I want to marry, as we have so much in common" (5). As far as I can tell, in this letter of 26 April 1949, Tsafendas is inventing a love interest for the purposes of rhetorical persuasion. But it is characteristic of how he matches the surreal but devastating fictions of apartheid ("foreign native," "homeland," and "non-White") with increasingly baroque fictions of his own. He goes on (in another passage that the *Report* is compelled to archive for posterity):

> I am here a man with-out a country. Living in strange lands, with people who have different ways of living & customs, and languages.
>
> I have a lot more to mention but cannot put it into writing.
>
> Remain Yours
>
> James Demetrios Tsafandakis
>
> P.N. Will you kindly send a note to my family when answering…

Until 1966, Tsafendas's life is one of constant movement—he foreshadows the twenty-first century illegal immigrant who is forced to live an unrelentingly precarious existence between states and borders. After 1966, his life is one of constant incarceration, and yet he carries on writing all through his prison years—an extraordinary archive that has been brought to light by the historian Zuleiga Adams.

Sometimes the letters are flamboyantly deluded, as when he speaks of a specially modified radio called a "graphanola" used by Portuguese authorities to control his

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non-Catholic brain; or claims to be related to a royal family abroad ("Ask Prince Philip, he will give you more details and a better description"); or signs himself "Mimikos Demetrios Tsafendakis Von William de Kanhume." Sometimes powerfully lucid, as when rebutting (in a 1979 letter to the editor of *Scope* magazine) the conspiracy theory that he had been ordered to kill Verwoerd by factions in the secret police. "I wish hereby to refute any such connections or plot," he writes in a haunting passage: "I have enough sins of my own without having to carry somebody else's" (cited in Adams, 124).

The letters "give us Tsafendas in all his rationality *and* irrationality" writes Adams, "which co-existed in equal measure" (9). In her PhD, "Race, Madness and the Archive," she quotes him writing of the "broken-up environment" of his childhood; the damage to his brain cells following electric shock treatment in Portugal, which "caused me to drift and I have not stopped drifting since then;" how "racialism" drove him out of Technical College in Johannesburg in 1941. Another sentence: "This is just a glimpse of my Experiences in an Abnormal World. I intend writing a Book if I ever have the opportunity, but medical attention is what I need at present" (136).

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6.

This excess leads on to the second problem, which concerns lists and listing. "I have a lot more to mention but cannot put it into writing." Precisely—and so the technique of the list appears again and again as writers confront a life that is both politically "meaningless" but (at the same time) intensely, overwhelmingly meaningful—at least when trying to understand what it meant for such a man to live in, through, and despite politics.

It is there in the array of shifting names that the *Report* prints on its first page: Demetrio, Dimitrio, Dimitro, Demetrios, Demetrius, James, Mimis, and Miemie. In the "litany of deportation orders and psychiatric reports" which Liza Key speaks of in her submission to the TRC, and in the list that she placed on his coffin in 1999 at a funeral service where security police outnumbered mourners: "Displaced person, sailor, Christian, communist, liberation fighter, political prisoner, hero. Remembered by your friends." This particular list is clearly a product of its 1990s moment—the invention of a usable past for the purposes of strengthening a new democracy.

But again, I am drawn instead to the clipped, numbered paragraphs of the *Report* as it tries to piece together the biography of its subject. Chapter II, "The History of Demitrio Tsafendas," reads as a list of unverified fragments rendered in (as Laura Stoler puts it) "the studied ineloquence of bureaucratese" (23):

> While in England, Tsafendas was noticed in the company of leftists. According to Tsafendas, some of these persons expressed the opinion in private discussions that the Prime Minister of South Africa should be shot, but he could not remember who said so. (6)

Which I feel compelled to keep quoting, almost at random:

> Tsafendas was always begging for a place to sleep and for meals. At Beira, for example, he slept at the fire-station for a time. (8)

Or again:

> During October, 1965, he hired a room at No. 7 Prince Street, Vredehoek, from a Mrs. Manning. There his neighbours complained that he would come to fetch water in the kitchen and spill it on the floor, with the result that he was given notice to vacate the room. (9)

They follow each other with no logical links or connective tissue, providing a much less usable list of identities than those placed on his coffin. We see Tsafendas as waiter in the Hillbrow cafés of central Johannesburg, and the seafront kiosks of Lourenco Marques (now Maputo). As chauffeur, welder, messenger, schizophrenic; as hawker of postcards on the Tagus in Lisbon. As frequenter of Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park; tractor mechanic in Germany; mental patient on the Isle of Wight; detainee in Egypt; self-styled "Professor of English" in Turkey; translator at the "immorality trials" of Greek and Portuguese seamen when back in Cape Town (the temptation is just to keep on multiplying examples).

But the *Report* is a profoundly bifurcated document, as the sociologist Deborah Posel notes in a careful, almost literary reading of it. It may be able to paint Tsafendas as "ideologically inchoate" in the first sections—a "lone gunman" figure akin to the Lee Harvey Oswald of the *Warren Report* (Posel, 340). But when it tries to account for the long chain of bureaucratic errors and ironies that allowed him to come within killing distance of the Prime Minister, there is also a counter-narrative that begins to operate: an attempt "to elevate the enemy into a worthy adversary," to conjure an unpredictable maverick who acted with foresight and planning:

> Whatever the causes were, there can be no doubt that he was a maladjusted, rejected, frustrated, feckless rolling-stone. He is boastful, selfish, unscrupulous and crafty … In the clouded mind of this outcast, who was a complete failure, whose life meant practically nothing to him, was born a cunning plan to make use of his power to destroy the head of a Government that he hated. (16)

Something odd has happened to the once flat prose, so that by the time we reach the chapter on "Demetrio Tsafendas's Motives," it all begins to read like an over-written pulp novel:

> He concealed the knives carefully and had enough self-control to wait his chance [*sic*]. Unaided, without a false move, with cunning timing and with unerring purpose he executed his plan. (16)

Useless but cunning, a total failure but also a criminal mastermind, ringmaster, an evil genius—the challenge of "plotting" Tsafendas is particularly visible in this official document. But of course, it is present in all narratives' treatments of the past: they inevitably involve a contest about what or how much or how little a historical figure should mean. Or perhaps, present in all narrative. In *Aspects of the Novel,* E.

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M. Forster expresses his dismay at the vulgarizing, parasitic tendency of plot on the raw data of experience: "For, the more we look at the story (the story that is a story, mind), the more we disentangle it from the finer growths that it supports, the less we shall find to admire" (17). And because its beginning and end are arbitrary, "[i]t runs like a backbone—or may I say a tapeworm."

7.

This last sentence is a subset of the next problem, which I will call fragile association. Forster's polite primer on the novel is too outdated to use in a work of academic scholarship nowadays, when narrative theory is so elaborate and complex—yet, the tapeworm simile makes it stay with me nonetheless, arcing across the century. In the same way that Tsafendas is always linked in my neural pathways with that other obscure prodigy, Coetzee's unclassifiable gardener Michael K, described at one point as "a parasite dozing in the gut":

> Parasite was the word the police captain had used: the camp at Jakkalsdrif, a nest of parasites hanging from the neat sunlit town, eating its substance, giving no nourishment back. Yet to K lying idle in his bed, thinking without passion (What is it to me, after all? he thought), it was no longer obvious which was host and which parasite, camp or town. (116)

A complex scatterplot of associations surrounds Tsafendas' infamous tapeworm—metaphors of host and parasite within the social organization of unjust societies. Of being estranged from your own body. Of inverting the apartheid logic which claimed that because there was something off-color about your external organ, the skin, so there must be something wrong inside you (this is the surgeon Jonathan Kaplan's rather ingenious dissection of the "commanding nematode" in the *South African Medical Journal*)

But such "literary" methods of apprehending a real life can't really be insisted or relied on. The work of critical interpretation, if handled too insistently, even risks becoming another kind of violence. So here, I simply want to point to certain things (which is, as Lionel Trilling once observed about *Anna Karenina,* what literary criticism is sometimes reduced to) and to register such lateral, allusive modes of thinking: links that aren't quite links: partial, personal, or chance identifications which cannot easily be accommodated or acknowledged in the process of argument, but which covertly structure so much thinking.

A more serendipitous example: in the papers donated by Key to the University of Cape Town Special Collections, I came across a "Letter from South Africa" in a March 1967 edition of the journal *Encounter*: an unexceptional account of the Tsafendas trial, full of praise for the due process shown by the apartheid judiciary. But the same edition was publishing (as its headline act) sections from J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*—that relentless hijacking of the lexicon of formal and medical reports for avant-garde purposes, and a work obsessed by the JFK assassination. (The fact that *Encounter* was later found to have been funded by the

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CIA, via the Congress for Cultural Freedom, only adds to the overlay of conspiracy and political mediation.)

Ballard led me in turn to DeLillo's *Libra* and his reflections on the "levels of research" that it entailed: "Anyone who enters this maze knows that you have to become part scientist, novelist, biographer, historian and existential detective" (Begley, "Art of Fiction," n.p). The maze—it set off a memory of a critic writing about how Tsafendas had "breached parliament, killing the minotaur in the heart of the maze" (Thurman, 59). This in an article about the early short stories of Ivan Vladislavić, *Missing Persons,* which are haunted by the death of an unnamed Prime Minister, and the mythical diary of his assassin. This fictive document is spoken of as "the key to all mysteries. The mysteries of meat and the imagination" (86): "Tsafendas's Diary comes to me in my sleep, word by word, drifting down from the dim ceiling of my head …" (89). In an interview, Vladislavić draws an equivalence between his secret history and the figure of the political prisoner: "I remember feeling that Robben Island was a kind of secret; that answers to certain questions were kept there. It's a strange analogy to draw, but Tsafendas is also a kind of secret, or answer to something" (cited in Thurman, 59).

Another example of this kind of associative cluster: when I typed this sentence a few pages back—*Here was a mixed-race man in a job reserved for "Whites," and one in the process of applying for reclassification as "Colored" to the same bureaucracy that had placed him on the so-called "black list"*—it stirred a memory of a sentence with a similar shape, and a similarly mordant humor. It was just out of reach, but after a few days, it drifted down from the dim ceiling of my head. A column by John Matshikiza, collected in a short story anthology that I had once reviewed. Matshikiza is looking at property in the hills of the Transkei (a one-time "homeland," in the fictive lexicon of apartheid), guided by a man who "had been born with a birthmark that had covered the whole of his head with a purple cowl," but who refuses to acknowledge the presence of his potential buyer:

> Now, we have all sorts of problems in this country and most of the time we would prefer to ignore them, considering how far we have already come. But when a purple man who is really a white man has a reality problem with a black man in what was formerly a black Bantustan, we have to stand back and look at what kind of situation we are actually sitting on. (*Omnibus*, 225)

The verbal energy in this sentence had lain curled up inside me for years, and now led to a collection of Matshikiza's writing in which I found a passionate obituary for Tsafendas. In it, the columnist reflects on the uncertainty among many black South Africans in the 1960s about how to react to the assassination. Remembering the satirical take of the British weekly *Private Eye* at the time—"a bunch of delighted Zulus prancing on its cover, over the headline: 'Verwoerd: A Nation Mourns'"—Matshikiza goes on:

> Tsafendas's dagger had not only felled a man, it had caused the despised and hated edifice of apartheid to falter into an uncertainty from which it never recovered.

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> Black South Africa, at least, should have been dancing with joy at the news, and soberly planning how its cause of freedom could profit from the event.
>
> Instead, we hesitated, not sure whether to laugh or cry. […] Now that someone had done it on our behalf, there was the sense of uncertainty that seizes the plantation when a vicious slave master is killed by that bad-ass Mandingo: "The *baas* is dead; who's going to feed us now?" (170)

For a moment, the plotting of Tsafendas is suspended between tragedy and farce. But then, like the 1966 *Report* as it works to conjures a suitable nemesis for Verwoerd; like the TRC submission which (inevitably) claimed that Tsafendas's vision of a flag for the United States of Mozambique "anticipated Archbishop Desmond Tutu by a good many years in articulating the dream of a Rainbow Nation;" like the too-easy paragraph of Van Woerden's/Jacobson's book in which we read that "the power of madness" had shown itself equal to "the madness of power"—like all of these, Matshikiza's tribute cannot help metabolizing a final motive and meaning, a finishing cadence. "Tsafendas killed Verwoerd," he writes, "because Verwoerd's relentless need to place people in race-labeled boxes was a personal disaster for himself," while also being "an affront to all humanity": "His act of murder was based on the same principles as the Congress Alliance's Freedom Charter: apartheid was a crime against life."

8.

So here then is the problem of diagnosis—whether medical, historical, or political—and how long this can be suspended. "We are here to help you clarify the themes of your life," says one of the disembodied voices that intrude on Lee Oswald's narrative following his arrest in *Libra*. It could just as well be applied to the posture that many well-meaning recuperations of Tsafendas take toward their subject—especially in the plays made of his life by Anthony Sher and Anton Kreuger, in which Tsafendas becomes a character who is forced to voice himself, to interpret his own life coherently. If he is written off as a "meaningless creature" in the 1960s, then in the decades post-apartheid, there is a risk of making him mean too much.

I found a shape for thinking through all this in Leslie Jamison's recent essay collection, *The Empathy Exams*. In "Devil's Bait," she explores the world of those who believe that they have Morgellons disease: that their skin is infested with fibers or fragments or crystals, excretions that they examine obsessively and collect in Tupperwares or matchboxes, even though the medical establishment refuses to recognize the condition and deems it a kind of delusional parasitosis. The descriptions of how such patients haunt clinics asking for re-examination immediately chime with the archival records of Demetrios, always asking to be examined for a tapeworm, whichever institution he found himself in. Sometimes, he liked to joke, he would hear the parasite purring like a kitten inside him when he passed a cake shop.

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As Jamison remarks after spending time with "Morgies" (and attending one of their support group conferences), the central question of her essay is not whether the condition is real or not. The real question is: How do I inhabit someone's pain without inhabiting their particular understanding of that pain? At this point, she turns against the very medium in which these questions have been so elegantly expressed:

> That anxiety is embedded in every layer of this essay; even its language—every verb choice, every qualifier. Do people have parasites or claim to have them? Do they *understand* or *believe* themselves to have them? I wish I could invent a verb tense full of open spaces—a tense that doesn't pretend to understand the precise mechanisms of which it spoke, a tense that could admit its own limits. As it is, I can't move an inch, finish a sentence, without running into some kind of crisis of imputation or connotation. Every twist of syntax is an assertion of doubt or reality. (40)

In one sense, the more you know about the past, the less you can say about it with any degree of certainty. The more empathetically you inhabit a life like that of Tsafendas, the less you want to metabolize any stable meanings from it—and the more you want to refrain from linked-up prose, which traps you. Perhaps it is this sense of syntactical stuckness that has produced in me the compensatory desire to move physically through locales, to retrace steps, and re-inhabit long-gone places —a sure sign of over-investment in a research project.

Here I may as well confess that:

(1) I went on a parliamentary tour to see the exact spot where Verwoerd was stabbed, but that the old House of Assembly was off-limits because (the irony) a meeting of the trade union of parliamentary tour guides was being held there.
(2) That I have been hanging around No. 7 Prince Street, where Tsafendas once spilled water on the floor, looking at a low-walled, white-painted town house with a lemon tree in the front garden that really doesn't give much away.
(3) That I feel an obscure urge to visit the white supremacist stronghold Orania and see in its museum the blood-stained suit that Verwoerd was wearing on 6 September 1966 (a date not lost on conspiracy theorists).
(4) That I have also been revisiting "places" in the textual sense, compulsively returning to *topoi* that I have already discussed in my more disciplined academic article (e.g. the account of the stabbing in the *Report*; and Tsafendas's letters from abroad; and Van Woerden's strange scene in the National Library; and the artwork that I discuss in the next section); that the first round of analysis (cf. Twidle, "Unusable Pasts") did not lay my questions to rest, and so (at the risk of intellectual parasitism, and maybe even self-plagiarism) I have felt compelled to keep asking them, *viz.* How had so obscure and questionable a man as Tsafendas managed to come into such deadly proximity to the embodiment of high apartheid power? *And what exactly was the nature of his "message?"*

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(5) That I have been corresponding with a PhD student abroad who is far more obsessed with this subject than me, and has been visiting remote Greek islands to track down the sailors on board the *Eleni* in 1966—the ship that was moored in Cape Town and often visited by Tsafendas in the weeks before his act.
(6) That I have in turn been drawn into the photographs of Billy Monk, a 1960s bouncer at The Catacombs who documented the Cape Town underworld near the docks: a world of women with running make-up and breasts exposed to leering punters; of people slumped on tables; of strippers shouting soundlessly against tacky décor; of Japanese sailors in thick-rimmed glasses doing the Twist; of brandies and Cokes, beehive hairdos and burly, bearded men dancing *langarm* on sticky floors while a tall policeman poses with a dwarf, ignoring the multiple violations of the Immorality Act going on in the photographs all around him.

And that every time I open the book, I half expect to see that Demetrios Tsafendas has somehow materialized in one of the frames, a late developing negative.

9.

Having moved through the National Library and the National Assembly, I will end in the National Gallery just a bit further down Government Avenue, where in a darkened room there is a filmic installation by the artist Penny Siopis, playing on a loop.

"Obscure White Messenger" is made from found 8-mm footage, often mottled and damaged: anonymous home movies, nostalgic scenes from a South African past that are set to Greek and Turkish music, the images rendered cryptic and uncanny in their new context. All text is "found" too: the title parasitizes Mandela's words, while subtitles at the bottom reproduce lines from psychiatric interviews conducted with Tsafendas after the murder, simultaneously tempting and frustrating the construction of a coherent story:

> Does god speak to you?
>
> Not personally
>
> Are your thoughts normal?
>
> They are too rapid

The disembodied words hang there in the dark gallery; behind them, we see a strange, flickering carousel of images—"traditional" dances by crews of miners on the Witwatersrand; pageants and fancy dress parties from the apartheid past; women gutting fish in Crete, or Mozambique, or is it Cape Town; lifeguard practice on whites-only beaches. *Again and again the ugliness of that period thrust itself into my consciousness* … A mingling of color-saturated nostalgia and hidden violence. The physical surfaces of the medium itself are damaged by the effects of light and age. Tsafendas describes the "coils and springs in front of my eyes" as we look through the stained, scratchy film:

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> It's been like this since 1937
>
> Can't help myself
>
> Can't defend myself
>
> Always exhausted
>
> Can't you see?
>
> No-one believes what I say.

Writing about what led her to this work, Siopis recalls reading through the 1966 press clippings relating to the assassination. She happened upon a short *Cape Times* report of 8 September that described Tsafendas's bedsit in Rondebosch. Since the state had prohibited photographs of anything linked to the assassin, the newspaper is forced to inventory the room via language instead:

> Except for two suitcases on top of the wardrobe and three threadbare jackets hanging inside it not an article in the room lay in an appropriate place.
>
> A hammer, a file, a pair of soiled socks, tins containing odds and ends, polish, shoe brushes, cutlery, an Oxford English Dictionary, and a hair brush lay scattered on the dressing table.

Previously, we have had lists of identities; here, we simply have objects:

> DISORDERED
>
> On the floor lay clothing, shoes, more cutlery, a box containing pots, pans, and a crumpled tog-bag, a tool box, a spanner, and screwdriver lying; loose, jars, tins, paper and rubbish.
>
> Other articles of clothing lay in heaps on the bed, hanging limply behind the door and over the chair. Above the bed, hanging from a nail in the window, was a yellow vest.
>
> At the bottom of the wardrobe lay a welder's mask and a straw hat; in the drawers, more rubbish.

"This short report captivated me," Siopis writes: "Its detail, its sadness, and how words worked when an image was not possible" (2011, 201). (Again I am paraphrasing and parasitizing my earlier "research." Again I am under the spell of compulsive return, the film still looping in my mind, long after it has left the gallery …)

Via its disjointed, dream-like poem of word, sound, and image, "Obscure White Messenger" then generates what is to me one final and entirely fascinating paradox. It is that the story of Tsafendas may be more fully "represented" in this oblique and experimental artwork than in more conventional documentaries that are squarely about the man. That, in fact, he might be done more justice by a film that does not use a single image of him than by works which actually show him on camera, interviewed in Sterkfontein hospital. That the unspoken message Tsafendas wanted to give Verwoerd that day in parliament is allowed to resurface in some of its strangeness, incoherence, power:

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I remember stabbing him

What made you do a thing like that?

I didn't agree with the policy

I didn't care about the consequences

I was so disgusted by the racial policies

What did you feel?

When you committed the murder?

Nothing

I just went blank

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