



PROJECT MUSE®

Unusable Pasts: Life-Writing, Literary Nonfiction, and the Case of Demetrios Tsafendas

Hedley Twidle

Research in African Literatures, Volume 46, Number 3, Fall 2015, pp. 1-23 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ral/summary/v046/46.3.twidle.html>

Unusable Pasts: Life-Writing, Literary Nonfiction, and the Case of Demetrios Tsafendas

HEDLEY TWIDLE
University of Cape Town
hedley.twidle@uct.ac.za

ABSTRACT

On September 6, 1966, a parliamentary messenger named Demetrios Tsafendas stabbed to death Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd in full view of South Africa's all-white House of Assembly. Tsafendas, the apartheid judiciary soon declared, was insane and without political motive: "a meaningless creature" who had acted on instructions from a tapeworm inside him. Often written off as a "freakish footnote" within the liberation story, his unsettled and complex life has nonetheless compelled a wide range of literary and artistic treatments: from memoir and microhistory to avant-garde fiction and filmic montage. Concentrating on Henk Van Woerden's (auto) biography *A Mouthful of Glass* (1998, trans. 2000) and Penny Siopis's short film *Obscure White Messenger* (2010), I hope to explore what valence one can give to avowedly speculative or formally experimental encounters with the archive and to trace how such a "useless life" (in the words of a presiding judge) might disclose the uncanny remains of South African history.

In 2012, Human Rights Day in South Africa was officially commemorated not in Sharpeville, where the massacre that it marks took place on March 21, 1960, but in Soweto's Kliptown, site of the signing of the Freedom Charter in 1955. President Jacob Zuma's decision to distance the proceedings—physically and politically—from a march originally organized by the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) provoked protest both on the streets of present-day Sharpeville and in the pages of the liberal press.¹ Yet this state-led attempt to arrogate the meanings of Sharpeville was derailed entirely by the events of August 16, 2012 at Marikana Platinum Mine, when over one hundred striking workers were shot by policemen and thirty-four killed. As the single most lethal use of force by the state against

civilians since 1960, the Marikana massacre was immediately and repeatedly dubbed the Sharpeville of post-apartheid South Africa.

As the country has moved through other anniversaries and historical landmarks in the last years—the centenary of the 1913 Natives Land Act, the death of Nelson Mandela, the celebration of two decades since the first democratic elections in 1994—such historical shorthands have become ever more common. Schoolchildren under Hendrik Verwoerd’s “Bantu education” system may have received better instruction than the “gutter education” of learners in some South African provinces today—a claim made by Mamphela Ramphele.² Campaigners against the Protection of Information Act (dubbed the “Secrecy Bill”) have repeatedly deemed it a step back toward totalitarianism and apartheid-era censorship.

What is at stake in such linkings of past and present? They seem at once inevitable and unsatisfying. Inevitable given that the conduct of the ruling party has surely borne out Ernst Renan’s 1881 insight that the modern nation state constitutes itself through acts of both selective commemoration and deliberate forgetting—“I would even go so far as to say historical error” (11)—and also given Edward Said’s warning that nationalist agendas tend to resemble each other, particularly “in such malleable activities as reconstructing the past and inventing tradition” (49).³ But they are also unsatisfying. Not only do such easy invocations of the past inevitably flatten out historical specificity, they also risk overlapping with a reactionary, depoliticizing reflex that collapses the difference between Afrikaner and African nationalist projects altogether: a strain of public discourse that works to excuse past injustice or to dismiss present transformation out of hand. As with those debates that turn obsessively on the question of whether to “blame” apartheid for current ills, the way in which history is put to work seems to show the often limited repertoire of conceptual shapes available to public culture as it debates the relation between past and present (and also the difficulty of disaggregating progressive from reactionary critique). What one is left with is “apartheid” as a stock of all-too-familiar and overused signs.

It is at this juncture that I hope to explore how the work of literature might suggest models for estranging the past and for escaping the overly familiar rhetorical “moves” of much public debate. If “Sharpeville,” “Bantu Education,” or “censorship” emerge as immediately recognizable (and usable) signs of apartheid’s gross human rights violations, then of what might an unusable past consist? What of an unrecognizable or even *unpredictable* past?

In addressing such questions from the direction of literary studies, my larger project tracks a cluster of figures and events that have remained somehow unavailing for now familiar narratives of struggle, liberation, truth, and reconciliation. It is concerned with lives and histories that do not fit such templates: *exempla* retrieved from the archive, but (to borrow from Michel Foucault’s 1977 essay “The Life of Infamous Men”) “examples which furnish not so much lessons to contemplate as brief effects whose force fades almost at once” (80). In reading a range of life-writing from South Africa, I have been drawn to persons and predicaments that do not yield any easy party-political capital, but which for that very reason may be all the more pointed in evoking what it means to live in, through, and despite politics.

Dimitri (or Demitrios) Tsafendas, the “mad Greek” who stabbed to death the architect of apartheid, Verwoerd, at the height of his power on September 6, 1966;

the demise of the African Resistance Movement (ARM) following the psychological collapse of one of its leaders who turned state witness and betrayed his closest friends; the trial and execution of member John Harris, who placed a suitcase of petrol and explosives under a bench in Johannesburg's Park Station during rush hour on July 24, 1964—each of these figures, and the events surrounding them, seem at once both present in the artistic imaginary but curiously absent from the way that South African history has come to be formalized.

Often entangled and conflated by literature, these events from the mid-1960s provide a very literal example of how (in the words of J. M. Coetzee's 1987 address "The Novel Today") there exists no "answer script" of history against which the literary text can be checked, as if by a censorious schoolmistress. What one finds in each case are gaps in official historiography, around which are ranged a wide variety of "creative" treatments—texts that are by turns speculative, explicitly personal, or formally experimental.

The histories of Tsafendas, Harris, and the ARM represent sites of disassociation and disavowal, of humiliation, mental collapse, misplaced heroism, and regret. The specter of meaninglessness haunts them: "The whole thing is so splendid and tragic and useless," wrote Alan Paton about the ARM trials (qtd. in Vigne 205). Summing up "The State versus Demetrio Tsafendas" on October 20, 1966, Judge J. P. Beyers talked of *'n niksbeduidende skepsel and sy nuttelose lewe*—a meaningless creature who had led a useless life. In the decade following Sharpville, such incoherent or incompetent "plots" could not easily be absorbed into a politics of resistance—if the political was to be envisioned only as the domain of organized, collective, and rational action.

The historicist impulse here seeks simply to thicken a sense of the South African past and to assess what valence one can give to speculative or formally experimental engagements with the apartheid archive. A more literary approach seeks to probe the matter of genre and literary form, imagined here as itself a kind of archive: a repertoire of narrative gestures and rhetorical figures that are simultaneously drawn on and refashioned in the writing event. As a deep narrative "grammar," in other words, that determines the coming-into-being of statements—that (to adapt Foucault from another context) describes *the law of what can be said* in any given mode (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 145). Why have these events compelled such generically varied and experimental approaches? What are their possibilities and limits; what is it that each chosen form can or cannot say?

In this essay, I concentrate on the Tsafendas story. The opening section sketches the archive of official documents, myth, and personal remembrance that surrounds and produces this man in the cultural imaginary. The later sections track more carefully how Tsafendas appears in a range of cultural forms, many of them experimental and playing at the borders of the fictive and the documentary. I pay close attention to the 1966 governmental report on the Verwoerd assassination, a fascinatingly conflicted document, yet one that many later creative treatments must rely on for its fine-grained archival texture. I then move on to Henk Van Woerden's speculative auto/biography *A Mouthful of Glass* (originally published in Dutch as *Een mond vol glas* in 1998, translated and edited by Dan Jacobson in 2000) and close with an analysis of Penny Siopis's short film *Obscure White Messenger* (2010)—the two cultural texts that represent, I believe, the most compelling responses to the question of Tsafendas.

I

“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.” So reads the *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Circumstances of the Death of the Late Dr. the Honourable Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd* as it renders the climactic deed at 14:10 in the House of Assembly, September 6, 1966: “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 tragicomic mixture of deference and violence here is suggestive of the larger problem that the enquiry had to address. 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?”

The death of Verwoerd marked an indelible date in the lives of many South Africans (as did the assassination of John F. Kennedy for Americans) and it provides a trigger for personal reminiscence among those of a certain generation: an entry into what one historian has called the “psychic archive” of apartheid (Adams 2). The name of the “mad Greek” passed into urban and prison slang—to “tsafenda” someone was to assault them—while the tapeworm within his body that he ostensibly acted on instructions from still resides in the cultural imagination: a “freakish footnote in the liberation story” and a piece of South African apocrypha that has, as will be shown, embedded itself in all kinds of places (Robins 29).

Yet for all its complex presence in artworks, anecdotes, and private memory, Tsafendas’s story is notably absent from official historiography and from public forms of memorialization. “Pauper’s Grave Likely for Man Who ‘Acted on Orders from Tape Worm’” read the headline in the *The Citizen* following his death on October 7, 1999. After the intervention of welfare workers, the funeral two days later was in fact conducted by the Greek Orthodox Church in Pretoria; but as Van Woerden tells it in the epilogue to his work, only a handful of mourners arrived at St Andrew’s Church in Krugersdorp. The grave, in a cemetery next to Sterkfontein Hospital, is described as unmarked: “No sign identifies the spot. It has simply disappeared among the mounds, rubble and tangled grass in the immediate vicinity” (Van Woerden 156).

Such disappearance extends also to historical scholarship. In the recent two-volume *Cambridge History of South Africa*, there is no index entry for Tsafendas. Scanning through other “standard” works, one finds the matter dealt with in short order, via stock phrases and passive voice. Verwoerd was “struck down by an assassin” (Wilson and Thompson 414), or “a deranged attendant” (Thompson 184) who remains unnamed. As with the earlier attempt on Verwoerd’s life by David Pratt on April 9, 1960, “the man was declared insane” (Davenport and Saunders 424). This “white parliamentary messenger” was “later found by a court to be deranged” (Giliomee and Mbenga 345); but there is no pause to ask what might have been involved in such “findings” and “declarations.”

Perhaps for such works of historical synthesis, concerned as they must be with the larger structural patterns and socioeconomic drivers of the southern African past, there is little time to dwell on such an individual. Yet in fact, the biography of Tsafendas—in its singularity, its radical mobility, and finally its

inconceivability—allows a powerful insight into the world of high apartheid: a program of modernist “rationalism” and social engineering revealed via its slip-pages, paradoxes, and misrecognitions. In tracing his transnational life and the complex racial positioning that he negotiated within it, one is left with the sense that the act for which Tsafendas is most famous, the killing of Verwoerd, is by no means the most meaningful aspect of his story.

It was of course in the interests of the National Party and its security apparatus to deem Tsafendas’s actions those of an irrational and delusional individual. “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,” Judge Beyers remarked, a turn of phrase that is quoted in almost everything written about the assassin (*Report* 11). Once the absence of any coherent political “plot” had been established, this “State President’s prisoner” was shut away from public view, placed first on Robben Island, then in solitary confinement in Pretoria Central’s death row for twenty-three years—the treatment of a mentally unstable patient as a regularly abused inmate in the innermost recesses of the “hanging jail” that marks one of the regime’s lesser-known but more vindictive human rights violations.

Yet the figure of Tsafendas is also largely absent from dominant narratives of the anti-apartheid struggle. Even Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994)—normally so ready to find a place for all at the “Rendezvous of Victory”—quickly passes over him as an “obscure white parliamentary messenger” (512). But Tsafendas was in fact of mixed racial origin, born January 1918 in Lourenço Marques to Amelia Williams (a household servant, the child of a Swazi woman and German man in colonial Mozambique) and Michael Tsafandakis (a marine engineer of Cretan extraction whose family had settled in Egypt). And if he was obscure, then he was, like J. M. Coetzee’s Michael K, “so obscure as to be a prodigy” (142).

A Mouthful of Glass leads us into a life of wandering and displacement, the extent and complexity of which, as Van Woerden remarks, “stun the imagination” (72). Sent to live with his grandmother in Alexandria until the age of six (a way for the family to avoid embarrassment), Tsafendas was returned to Mozambique in 1925. He was first placed in a Portuguese mission school, then despatched as a boarder to Middelburg in the Transvaal, where classmates taunted him for his dark complexion. The family, with his father now married to a different woman, had moved to Pretoria to find work during the Depression. The young Tsafendas crossed into the Union of South Africa illegally to follow them, having received the first of many refusals from South African immigration services. The family evidently wanted little to do with him and he began a succession of odd jobs: in Hillbrow tea rooms, where he distributed the odd Communist pamphlet; in the seafront kiosks and bars of Lourenço Marques; as chauffeur for Imperial Airlines in Quelimane; and back to Johannesburg as a welder and lathe operator, as the war effort swelled the South African economy, fitting parts to armored vehicles.

Yet by 1942, the official dossiers on Tsafendas had amassed too many troublesome phrases for him to be left alone: this “half-caste” with “communistic leanings” prone to “irregular attendance and loafing” was placed under increased scrutiny by the security services, who now waited for any excuse to deport him for good (*Report* 2, 3). He left for Cape Town, signed on with a Greek ship bound for Canada, and so began a twenty-year period of statelessness and almost constant movement. As the 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” stretching across twenty-five countries, thirteen ships, twelve hospitals, and leaving traces in secret police files ranging from Salazar’s PIDE to Israel’s Mossad (Key). In Liza Key’s 1997 submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on behalf of Tsafendas (a text that also provides the voice-over for her 1999 documentary *A Question of Madness*) she writes of Tsafendas’s journeying:

At one stage he walked across the frozen St Croix river from Canada into the United States. He presented himself at the Mandelbaum gate demanding entry into Israel from Jordan. He was detained on New York’s Ellis Island, put into military detention in Portugal, certified insane in England, baptised on a beach in Greece, given shock treatment in a German asylum and passed through France as a refugee under the auspices of the Red Cross. In 1964, fluent in eight languages, he returned to South Africa.⁴

Condensing the years 1942 to 1963 in this way produces almost a parable, or picaresque, of the wanderer. But the clipped, numbered paragraphs of the report— assembled from a major international enquiry and a mass of state documents following the assassination—serve as a reminder that these *wanderjahre* were anything but those enjoyed by the conventional literary traveller: that free narrative agent who proceeds toward self-knowledge and psychic integration through a series of disparate but meaningful experiences.

By contrast, Tsafendas was “a man who found all of many venues in the planet’s racial/spatial order inhospitable” and his peregrinations were marked with repeated instances of psychological collapse (Shapiro 250). Following the war, the phrase “illegal immigrant” joins the labels “half-caste” and “Communist” in government documents; he is deported from New York’s Ellis Island to Greece for no more reason, it seems, than his name. “It is not a small mistake,” he wrote to U.S. authorities from Greece in 1948, “the difference is between the North Pole and the South Pole” (*Report* 4). This animus toward America persisted, a country whose wartime convoys he had helped to service as a crew member on the “Liberty Ships”: vessels built in record time to keep pace with the Allied war effort and to replace those sunk by German U-boats. Tsafendas would write letters to President Roosevelt and even try to sue his government—a signal of how his life and times soon began to exceed the frame of any narrowly, or nationally, conceived history of South Africa.

In fact it was only through bureaucratic error that Tsafendas did reenter the country and its history at all. Between 1938 and 1960, he constantly applied for permanent residency in South Africa and was constantly refused. In a letter on April 12, 1949 to the Department of the Interior, he makes his case once again, writing of having “risked my life in submarine infested seas”: “I made the mistake of not taking out my citizenship papers before I went to serve, due to my young age then & inexperience, thinking that I was automatically an African citizen” (*Report* 5). The letter is revealing in its mixture of rhetorical sophistication and political innocence, or utopianism: the phrase “African citizen” was surely the wrong one to use on the South African officials at the time, almost the utopian inverse of the surreal apartheid coinage “foreign native.” It goes on:

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. 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 . . .

Tsafendas would continue writing to state authorities his whole life, even during his incarceration in Pretoria.⁵ Combined with psychiatric interviews and medical reports, the result is a large collection of archival material, a textual corpus that bears the violence of apartheid usage at every turn, but also preserves Tsafendas's own words and writerly persona to a remarkable extent. These form a complex blend of intelligence and petulance, lucidity and delusion, political insight and personal trauma.

In a discussion of autobiography by political prisoners in South Africa, Paul Gready draws on Foucault's insight that power can in one sense be understood as a form of state writing, endless and overpowering. He then goes on to make an important remark about the intensely fictive qualities even at the heart of such supposedly official language: "The written fictions of apartheid, though often patently ridiculous, had a devastating operational truth of their own" (492). Yet in the case of Tsafendas, who was prepared to enter into correspondence with the state again and again—to write back when so many others would surely have given up, to match the political fictions of apartheid with increasingly baroque fictions of his own—the results were complex and contradictory.

On the one hand, he was flagged as a troublemaker and placed on the "black list" by the Department of Interior in September 1959, intended to prevent him from ever reentering South Africa. But at the same time, the Portuguese authorities had granted him a kind of amnesty and a new passport. In South Africa, the files on him began to multiply and diverge from each other: indeed much of the latter half of the *Report* is a kind of "object biography" given over to tracing how dossiers G.8226 ("the Tsafendakis file") and B.7771 ("the Tsafandakis file") existed in parallel for decades and were never adequately cross-referenced. His shape-shifting name also seemed to have something to do with how this life managed to slip between the cracks of the racialized, rationalized grid. On November 2, 1963, the passport control officer responsible for letting Tsafendas back into South Africa "looked up the name under the index letter 'S,' as a result of the sound association in the pronunciation of his surname": Stafendas (*Report* 19).

This was by no means the last bureaucratic irony associated with the Tsafendas case. In September 1965, having reached Cape Town to explore the possibility of marriage to a woman named Helen Daniels (with whom he had corresponded), he applied to the Department of the Interior for reclassification as "Coloured." The bureaucratic mechanisms were overwhelmed by applications in the other direction and, while awaiting the outcome, Tsafendas took up the fateful post as parliamentary messenger, a job reserved for "Whites" according to apartheid legislation. How could such a man have been accepted into the inner sanctums of government, the Commission demanded? Precisely because, as the Chief Messenger Mr. Burger explained, of the job reservation policy and the difficulty of filling a post with a

racial stigma: "I have to scour the streets, because nobody wants to do the humble work, under the humble name of messenger" (*Report* 25). In the meantime, the reclassification request had prompted the Department of the Interior to connect files G.8226 and B.7771 and issue a deportation order. It lay dormant on an official's desk on the day that Tsafendas stabbed Verwoerd.

It is worth pausing to note the layer upon layer of ironies compacted into this moment: how it shows the multiple absurdities of the Verwoerdian machine, which 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 others. What form of writing, one wonders, could possibly comprehend such a life? In her submission to the TRC, Key resorts again to the litany, a list that she also placed on Tsafendas's coffin in 1999: "Displaced person, sailor, Christian, communist, liberation fighter, political prisoner, hero. Remembered by your friends." It is clearly a product of its moment, part of a much larger project of historical recuperation underway in South Africa's 1990s transition—the invention of a past that might be recognizable and usable for the purposes of strengthening a new democracy.

Today, at a greater historical distance, one might want to add to this a range of less overtly political (or usable) roles: waiter, chauffeur, welder, messenger, possible schizophrenic, hawker of postcards on the Tagus in Lisbon, frequenter of Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, tractor mechanic in Germany, self-styled teacher and "Professor of English" in Turkey, and translator at the "immorality trials" of Greek and Portuguese seamen when back in Cape Town. Indeed, the rhetorical technique of the list is hard to resist when faced with such a life, a form of *amplificatio* that is content simply to multiply details, examples, and anecdotes.

In the remainder of this piece I explore artistic responses to the Tsafendas story more carefully, asking what kinds of shape have been given to his life by various literary and filmic texts. What narrative logics are operating within each and what are their consequences? What cultural forms might be adequate for a life-story that is, in one sense, "useless" but at the same time intensely significant, overdetermined, excessive; where there is always (to use Tsafendas's own words) "a lot more to mention" that one "cannot put . . . into writing?" (*Report* 5).

II

"They killed the Prime Minister during the winter" (9), reads the opening line of Ivan Vladislavić's first work, *Missing Persons* (1989), a short story collection that returns compulsively to the death of this unnamed figure and the identity of his assassin. In the darkly comic, deconstructed fairy tale "Tsafendas's Diary," this imaginary document becomes a kind of South African *urtext*, the object of an obsessive quest through the unconscious of a damaged society: "Granny smiles. 'You must fetch it for us,' she says. 'Tsafendas's Diary is the key to all mysteries. The mysteries of meat and the imagination'" (86).

The compulsive knitting of this grandmother figure (reminiscent of the Fates or Dickens's sinister Madame Defarge), and the long, fanged black ribbon that results, is read by one critic as a possible reference to a larger social fabrication of the tapeworm alibi: "a misrepresentation of the assassin as simply deluded—an oversimplification, perhaps a lie—created by the apartheid government and

widely accepted by the population" (Thurman 61).⁶ At the same time, the imperative to find the talismanic "diary of a madman" evokes the conspiracy theories surrounding Tsafendas (instrument of the far right Broederbond, or brainwashed Communist catspaw?) that could never be quite dispelled: he was a semi-mythical figure who had, Thurman writes, "breached parliament, killing the minotaur in the heart of the maze" (59).

In Vladislavić's hands, the form of the short story cycle both invites and resists larger theories of coherence, tempting readers to make possible links between parts while never providing enough internal evidence of whether such inferences can be justified: by the end we have entered into arcane webs of signification surrounding the assassination, but with no possibility of explication or diagnosis. Its cryptic transect of a violent society has something in common with the "condensed novels" that make up J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) or even the fictionalized reconstructions of Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988)—both works haunted by the 1963 Kennedy assassination, both combining the technical specificity and "flat prose" of the official document with a terminally unresolved or "open" structure.⁷

In Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* (1994, trans. De Kock, 1999), widely regarded as one of the outstanding novels of the South African transition, the violent and inbred son of the Benade family, Lambert, works on a "never-ending painting" in his den—a bricolage of detritus from the Afrikaner nationalist imaginary that the larger work explores with relentless irony. Amid this bizarre palimpsest of southern African history, the "lekker [lovely] pink" paint used for the feather in the cap of Jan van Riebeeck is also used for Tsafendas's Worm:

He cut out the picture of Tsafendas from *Huisgenoot*. Still in jail over Verwoerd. Very old now, but he's still got the worm. He hung his Republic Day medal on Tsafendas's chest, onto a nail going right through his HEART. He'd drawn the heart onto the picture himself. Treppie came and asked if that was the Lord Jesus there with his bleeding heart. Then he asked Treppie if he was mad or something, Jesus didn't have a worm. 'Cause the worm starts in the heart and goes all the way to the guts, until you can't make out anymore what's guts and what's worm. (van Niekerk 166)

The historical impasto here registers an array of possible meanings and anxieties surrounding Tsafendas in the Afrikaner nationalist imagination. There is the intrusion of a violent, unexpected outlier into the idealized domestic space of the *Huisgenoot* [*House-Helper*] magazine: a monster to be killed like a vampire, but one that might also be a messiah bearing an incomprehensible message. "Die Here maak nie 'n fout nie," as Betsie Verwoerd famously remarked at her husband's funeral, still adhering to the script of a larger providential design (with the Afrikaner nation as a chosen people) in the face of such radical historical contingency: God does not make a mistake. One could even suggest that the blurring of "guts" and "worm" here carries with it a complex metaphoric of host and parasite within the social organization of apartheid South Africa, terms that (as Coetzee's comparably obscure prodigy Michael K reflects) are likely to switch places on closer inspection (116). And just as the inbred Benade family are the final logic, or *reductio ad absurdum*, of a Verwoerdian insistence on cultural "purity" (the other side of the Republic Day medal, so to speak), so Tsafendas becomes a kind of obverse

or doppelganger to Verwoerd. He is a figure both disavowed by nationalist historiography and endlessly summoned by it, assassin and victim welded together forever by the violent act.

In these dense and self-aware works of fiction, "Tsafendas" is able to move back and forth from historical individual to a referent in the service of some other narrative: whether as chronological marker, figure of folk memory, or as a means of accessing larger psychic or social terrains. In this sense, interpretation is (to borrow from philosophy) unfalsifiable and potentially endless as it enters such circuits of meaning. But how can one preserve a "literary" mode of analysis when turning toward the ostensibly nonfictional or documentary treatments that address themselves more squarely to the historical existence of the man?

Reading the 1966 governmental report from cover to cover is to be reminded of the difficulties involved in even accepting the term "nonfiction"—a label that is (as I have suggested elsewhere) by turns insufficient and indispensable (Twiddle). Compiled from widely distributed questionnaires, extensive international enquiries, and over one hundred oral testimonies, the document is on one hand the culmination of a massive research project dedicated to the facts of the matter, charged with covering all aspects "which the said Commission deems to be in the public interest." Even with this rider, and in counterpoint to a steadily entrenching police state under B. J. Vorster, it released a dense load of (often embarrassing) information into the public domain and has without doubt served as the sourcebook for many subsequent reimaginings of Tsafendas's life. Yet on the other hand, its many instabilities emphasize that there can never be a pretext or historical "answer script" against which later versions can be checked; that even the most official and impersonal forms can be tendentious and highly wrought textual artifacts where questions of form and genre have distinctly political consequences.

In a close reading of the report, the sociologist and historian Deborah Posel reveals it as a profoundly bifurcated document. In one mode it portrays Tsafendas as an ineffectual and meaningless figure: a "lone gunman" akin to Lee Harvey Oswald in *The Warren Report*. In this narrative, the assassin is "ideologically inchoate" and figured as the pathetic nemesis of everything that Verwoerd stood for: "racial purity, community, national rootedness, resolute faith, ideological certitude, patriarchal manhood" (Posel 340). Yet at the same time, there is a counter-narrative operating. In trying to offset the long chain of bureaucratic errors and ironies that allowed Tsafendas to come within stabbing distance of the Prime Minister, there is also a vexed attempt "to elevate the enemy into a worthy adversary," to conjure an unpredictable maverick who acted with foresight and planning (Ibid. 336).

One senses this lurch of gear between chapters two and three, as the report moves from "The History of Demetrio Tsafendas" to "Demetrio Tsafendas's Motives." In the former, the text is only required to provide a chronologically arranged list of all verifiable (and some unverifiable) information about its subject along with extracts from other correspondence and reports, many of them medical. If the twenty-six-volume *Warren Report* on the Kennedy assassination is, in DeLillo's words, "the *Oxford English Dictionary* of the assassination and also the Joycean novel" (qtd. in Begley, n.pag.), then in the South African document one also senses how the fine-grained period details and "found" narratives collated in its staccato paragraphs might also be suggestive for a creative imagination. To

select a fragment 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). Each numbered paragraph, each report within a report threatens to open a door into another unmanageable archive: a *mise en abyme* of a story within a story that multiplies contingency so that the more that is known of this life, the less that can be said about it.

When the report switches to questions of motive, however, and must now generate logical connections between the paragraphs, something odd happens to the previously constrained language: "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" (16). Gathering momentum, it goes on: "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). Trying to balance the mutually exclusive demands of meaninglessness and master-plot, the report begins to read like an over-written pulp novel. Tsafendas is both "feckless" and "cunning"; robbed of agency but also granted "power" within the course of a single sentence. The rhetoric dilates accordingly to paper over such non-sequiturs, and by the end of the section, the once flat prose is now sagging under the weight of adjectives and unidiomatic translation: "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).

The paradox registered so baldly here in the "plotting" of Tsafendas—the simultaneous demand for and frustration of an immediately legible cultural meaning or narrative shape—is one that I want to trace in later responses to his life. And while this is a paradox particularly visible in the 1966 report, it is of course at play in any story told about the past. For narrative histories, as Mink remarks, "should be aggregative insofar as they are histories, but cannot be, insofar as they are narratives" (217). That is to say, all historical narratives have a centrifugal impulse toward greater complexity and contingency, but one that inevitably rides in tension with the need to select, order, and emplot such data into a legible narrative arc of some kind. The remaining sections here track how more "creative" experiments in nonfiction apprehend such an excessive and over-determined figure. To what extent are they able to plot his life without collapsing it into a meaning that is expedient or premature and what can this tell us about how literary culture engages the South African past?

III

The most immediate quality of Van Woerden's *A Mouthful of Glass*, I would suggest, is its concision: at only 168 pages it has the sense of being a deliberately minor work. And if this first (and only) book-length treatment of Tsafendas is indeed a biography, then it is hardly "definitive," "authorized," "magisterial," or any other of the adjectives routinely attached to that word. Instead, its slimness reads as a deliberate, formal riposte to the surfeit of state archiving that Tsafendas's life produced. It begins in medias res, with a novelistic vignette from the mid-point of its subject's wanderings: an episode in Hamburg's General Hospital where one "Demitrios Tsafendon" was admitted for agitation, exhaustion, and "delusional

psychosis" in February 1955. Following electroshock treatment and partial recovery, he left on June 6: "He wore a faded, cinnamon-colored suit. A taxi took him to the centre of town" (5).

In the notes at the back of the book, Van Woerden reveals the combination of different sources that produce this passage. The first is a detailed set of medical records from Germany, sent on request to Dr. I. Sakinofsky (head of psychiatry at Groote Schuur Hospital, who interviewed Tsafendas shortly after the assassination) and then subsequently rediscovered by Van Woerden among twelve large cartons of documents in the Pretoria State Archives. Yet having made this claim to archival fidelity, the authorial commentary then swerves in a different direction: "The faded brown suit in which I dress Demetrios on his discharge from hospital is derived from a line in the verse of Alexandrian poet, K. P. Kavafis, a fellow townsman of his between 1919 and 1925" (161).

How can one interpret such a flagrantly "literary" detail within a nonfictional work: a self-confessed departure from the actual? In "The Art of Biography," Virginia Woolf wrote memorably of the variable kinds of "fact" in the writing process, remarking that "if [the biographer] invents facts as an artist invents them—facts that no one else can verify—and tries to combine them with the facts of the other sort, they destroy each other" (184–85). But what if, as is the case in here, a paratextual mechanism exists to register and reflect on this very process?

A Mouthful of Glass, Van Woerden writes in his notes, is "a cautious attempt at *anamnesis*—a bringing back to memory of that which has been forgotten": "by means of Demetrios's story I would be able to render something of the South African trauma" (159). Yet this representational burden, which seems to be tending toward some kind of national allegory, is then qualified: "To try to recall the prior history of someone's illness is not the same thing as giving a diagnosis of it" (159). Here then is the tension that bifurcates the government report—between "prior history" and "diagnosis"—a tension that this very different exercise in life-writing is for the most part able to acknowledge and keep in dynamic relation through a supple and self-reflexive narrative mechanism.

The notes admit to a mixture of documentary rigor, novelistic scene-painting, and intertextual influence—but also a more intangible quality of writerly "inference" and "intuition": an imaginative feeling for the material that was, the narrator claims, enhanced by his own meetings with Tsafendas in the 1990s. Yet equally, the rambling conversations with an elderly, hard-of-hearing Demetrios in Sterkfontein Hospital that occupy the latter sections of the book hardly provide an *ex cathedra* confirmation of what comes before. Instead, they allow us to see the subject of the work constantly reimagining and rescripting his life, a dynamic that is in turn refracted back into the biographical narrative proper. "Demetrios looked at his past as if through a kaleidoscope," Van Woerden writes when analyzing the testimony given in interviews at Groote Schuur Hospital in the days after the assassination: "depending on need or desire, he would give it a quarter-turn this way or that" (46). The intuition afforded by the first-hand experience of meeting Tsafendas, in other words, works to unsettle the archival testimony on which much of the book has been based, a quality signaled by the series of verbal cues and metaphors as we read.

As such, the modal verbs and noninsistent syntax of Jacobson's translation carry with them a hedged or semi-fictional quality, while the images (in the

modernist sense) that the work evolves for understanding its own procedures—the “cinnamon-coloured suit,” the kaleidoscope—offer provocative redefinitions of what the archive underlying such a project of life-writing might be. They show the artifice and imaginative liberties involved in oral testimony, memory work, and the writing up of “real” lives—but they do so without annulling the truth claims of the larger project. The kaleidoscope holds in mind the projections and tricks of memory; the poetic borrowing acknowledges that texts are built from other texts and tempts the reader to enter Cavafy’s meditations on place and exile, clearly signaled as a body of work that underwrites Van Woerden’s own.

The suit comes from a piece titled “Days of 1908,” but one can turn to Cavafy’s most famous work, “The City,” for a poetics through which to read Van Woerden’s complex relation to his subject and to the country that he is writing about. When the first speaker of the poem states, “I’ll go to another country, go to another shore, / find another city better than this one,” the second replies, “You won’t find a new country, won’t find another shore. / This city will always pursue you”:

You will always end up in this city. Don’t hope for things elsewhere:
there is no ship for you, there is no road.
As you’ve wasted your life here, in this small corner,
you’ve destroyed it everywhere else in the world. (28)

This vexed sense of place and displacement, of mobility and entrapment, is surely resonant in the transnational odyssey of Tsafendas’s life story; but it also underwrites the strong autobiographical element in *A Mouthful of Glass*. Indeed, the idea that “the city will always pursue you” is an apt summary of the way Van Woerden evokes his relationship to Cape Town, where he arrived at age nine following his family’s move from the Netherlands in 1956.

The first chapter, “The Emigrants,” traces his adolescence in the southern suburbs of the city: his fascination for Cape Town’s Islamic cultures and his friendships with mixed-race (“Coloured”) classmates at a time when apartheid’s forced removals were gathering momentum.⁸ In Van Woerden’s reading of the migrant—“an uncertain and incomplete man” who “lives in an inveterate state of unease” (10)—it is no accident that Verwoerd (who became Prime Minister in 1958) was also the son of an immigrant: like Van Woerden he is also a “half-baked Hollander” (there is even a verbal affinity between their names that plays unwittingly across the text, as if they are scrambled versions of each other).

The intense ambition and ideological fervor brought to bear as Verwoerd’s administration sought to disentangle the complex, creolized communities of Cape Town is seen in part as the over-compensation of the outsider trying to assimilate: to better himself and those like him. If Tsafendas was a migrant’s son who found every venue of the modern state inhospitable, then Verwoerd was the obverse: a man granted every political honor and eventually given dictatorial power over South Africa’s black population, whom he sought to render “foreign natives” in the land of their birth. Despairing of this hardening Afrikaner nationalism (but also of the ineffectual response of white liberalism in his student circles), the young Van Woerden leaves South Africa in disgust in 1968: “wholly unprepared for the great thirst that awaited me, the nostalgia I would feel for the future I had left behind” (20).

As such the work sets up a complex relay of equivalences and partial identifications between assassin, victim, and (auto)biographer. For some reviewers, this risked being an “onerous” postmodern strategy, and the personal elements were substantially reduced by Jacobson when he translated the work from the Dutch (Kaplan 396). Yet those that remain represent an intriguing strategy for dealing with a personal investment—an *over*-investment perhaps—in a given research project. This is the “back end” of the work of biography, so to speak, which is able to speculate on why certain writers are drawn to certain lives but that must generally be downplayed or effaced from more standard works.

One sees this richer account of “subject formation” (in multiple senses) in the complex scene that is given as the genesis of the work we are reading. In the second chapter, “The Way Back,” Van Woerden describes his return to South Africa in the 1990s, an experience that is by turns uplifting, emotional, and confusing. At one point he takes shelter in the National Library of South Africa; but “[f]rom that world, the world outside, the library hardly offered me a refuge” (26). Here he finds himself “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” (26). Turning to newspapers on microfiche, he orders a four-months sampling of *Die Burger* newspaper from January 1, 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)

The rising nausea of this particular archive fever forces him outside again, into the Company Gardens established by the Dutch East India Company in the 17th century, now a city parkland in which parliament is located—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). At 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: “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 is, at least in the English version, a dense scene of origin: the narrator moves back and forth between exterior and interior, world and archive. Taking refuge from a confusing present, he is propelled into it again by a sense of historical disgust—the sense of the past as incorrigible and unusable. Through it all sounds a note of belatedness and intellectual intensity that characterizes many works by artists returning during the 1990s transition: the need to make up for lost time, to write oneself into “the new South Africa,” and the pressure of trying to find a subject able to sustain this. In Van Woerden’s autobiographical sections more generally, there seems to be a sublimated fascination with, or erotic longing for,

the “Coloured” body: something that leads to the visceral reaction to the “scandals” of the past, but is also registered in the inclusion of crass remarks (“You like chocolate?”) from onlookers as he walks around town with a young woman in the 1990s present. Within the scene in the gardens, this unspoken psycho-sexual charge combines with all of the above to produce the “subject” of Tsafendas, and on cue the governmental report appears as a kind of *deus ex machina*. But intriguingly, its influence is immediately downplayed, as if the narrator is reluctant to concede how much his work must have relied on an official apartheid document, one steeped in the concept of “immorality” that so disgusts him in the library.

IV

A continuing chain of textual influence can be traced in two less supple responses to the Tsafendas story. One is Anthony Sher’s 2003 play *I.D.*, which acknowledges its debt to Van Woerden’s work on the title page and adapts many of its “images” for the stage. In Sher’s script, though, the tale of Tsafendas and his victim is rendered as a kind of tragi-comedy with a caricatural, almost cartoonish element. His *wanderjahre*, for example, are compressed into “The Ballet of the Suitcases,” “a speeded up sequence in which TSAFENDAS and the CAST play out his travels, using suitcases to create boats, desks, stairs, cells, etc. It’s like a routine from an old silent comedy” (33).

This caricature is amplified by Sher’s decision to make the tapeworm itself into a character, *Lintwurm*: a sinister narrator figure who also comes to play a Mr. Hyde to the amiable Jekyll of Demetrios. This “smiling, seedy bar-fly type” wearing goggles and “speaking in a smoky South African drawl” addresses the audience directly, keeping up a continuous patter (14). As a stage device, it is useful for exposition, but risks reconfirming the popular myth about Tsafendas—that he acted on instructions from a worm inside him—rather than debunking it.

Like Krueger’s slightly earlier work for the stage, *Living in Strange Lands: The Testimony of Dimitri Tsafendas* (2001), Sher’s play is also drawn to giving the unruly mass of information surrounding Tsafendas a romantic arc. From the first lines—“I dream of a girl . . . waiting for me . . . somewhere in Africa . . .” (13)—we are nudged toward imagining a Homeric saga of a “Wandering Greek” wanting to return home to his African Penelope: in this case Helen Daniels, whom he had met through the church and been corresponding with from Durban, exploring an offer of marriage. The much more complex and internalized racial hurt that the Tsafendas story allows us to glimpse in Van Woerden’s work is externalized and pressed into a plot of thwarted love across the “colour-bar”: one of the well-worn tropes of South African literature under apartheid. In Krueger’s one-man play, this is even given as the motivation during the moment of assassination: “In the Neck. Shoulder. Lungs. Heart. . . . Bastard! Where’s that Bastard! Why’d you have to take her away from me?” (28).

Here again it is revealing to read such sympathetic recuperations of his life alongside the governmental report that underwrites them. Both plays circle back to the initial (physical) meeting of Tsafendas with Helen in Cape Town, one rendered as a moment of hope and possibility. But on this matter, the “flat prose” of the report is in its own way inimitable: “Miss Daniels testified how he arrived at their home with a big hole in his jersey, and dressed untidily. Her brother fetched

his luggage from the station. This consisted of a suitcase containing mainly dirty washing and another suitcase containing tools, pots and pans. She immediately lost all interest in him, and he never showed any interest in her either." (9) A few paragraphs later, we read, "One gains the impression that he was unacceptable to the female sex" (9).

The summary verdict is a jolt after reading entire plays pinned on a tragic romance: unlike those, it never allows us to forget the violence inherent in representing such a figure in the first instance, or the sense of failure, discomfort, and incoherence that should properly attend it. In making the character Tsafendas speak (as it were) for himself—in metabolizing the disparate archival traces into an actor's monologue—the very form of these well-meaning dramas seems like the wrong aesthetic choice: one that places too great a burden on this historical subject in expecting him to interpret his own life coherently.

Finally, it is revealing to consider a response to Tsafendas that is based on a very different aesthetic, and one that works more closely in and out of the archival grain. *Obscure White Messenger* (2010) by Penny Siopis is a filmic reimagining of the Tsafendas story, its title alluding to Mandela's one-line dismissal of the man. At just under fifteen minutes, it consists of "culled and combined bits of anonymous home movies" on grainy 8mm film—a shifting sequence of images from South Africa, Greece, and other, unidentifiable locations (Siopis, "Obscure White Messenger" 201). Turkish music plays in the background while subtitles appear at the bottom of the screen in a question-and-answer format:

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

Some of these are drawn from psychiatrists' interviews with Tsafendas conducted in Groote Schuur Hospital after the murder, as well as medical reports and legal documents; but other fragments come from the secondary archive of Key's documentary and Van Woerden's prose.

The result is a form that is able to collapse into one space accounts given at very different times and shows the fictive lineaments within "the documentary" itself. The intimate address and therapeutic expansiveness of Sher's and Krueger's dramatic monologues are replaced by a disjointed and dream-like poem in multiple media, a bricolage of "answers" that are unpredictable and sometimes contradictory. Set against footage of ships and ports, swimming pools, Greek orthodox ceremonies, and fish markets, we see on screen the unvoiced, deeply affecting lines from the "Transcript of Interview with Demetrios Tsafendas Conducted in the Groote Schuur Hospital Casualty Department on September 6th 1966 at 7.00 p.m.": "Why are you crying? / I don't know / Aren't you pleased with what you have done? / Yes / I'm glad to speak to you / Better class / I am always among the poorer class of people."

As the words hang in filmic space, the "line breaks" between each subtitle catch the audience in the act of furnishing an explanation prematurely: "My father was a special drinker / of Turkish coffee." So too, we are tempted to forge linkages between text and the kaleidoscopic reel of images behind it: "traditional"

dances by crews of miners on the Witwatersrand, pageants and fancy dress parties from the apartheid past. As in Siopis's other mediations on this period of South African history—*Verwoerd Speaks 1966* (1999) and *The Master Is Drowning* (2012)—the resulting filmic texture is an uneasy splicing of sublimated violence and color-saturated nostalgia, with the physical surfaces of the medium itself damaged by the effects of light and age. The “coils and springs in front of my eyes,” which Tsafendas describes as a result of his high blood pressure and being “troubled in [his] nerves,” are echoed in the experience of watching the stained and mottled film.

Reflecting on what led her to make the piece, Siopis recalls working through the 1966 press clippings relating to the assassination and happening on a short *Cape Times* report of September 8 that described Tsafendas's studio apartment in Rondebosch. Since the state had prohibited photographs of anything linked to the assassin, the newspaper anatomizes the contents of the room via language instead, objects spilled out from the luggage that Helen Daniels and so many others remembered in their testimony before the commission:

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.

Whereas later recuperations tend to list Tsafendas's identities (Key's litany, for example, which was placed on his coffin in 1999), here we simply have objects: inanimate things that retain their stubborn facticity and wordless testimony. Under one of the telegraphic subheadings, “DISORDERED,” the list continues unabated—compensating for the assassin's ideological opacity by entering more deeply into an inscrutable material world: “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.”

“This short report captivated me,” Siopis remarks: “Its detail, its sadness, and how words worked when an image was not possible” (“Obscure White Messenger” 201). These two principles—working with found materials and refusing the explicit image—create a disruptive response to the state-sponsored archival surfeit surrounding and producing Tsafendas. As in *A Mouthful of Glass*, the obliqueness and concision of the piece could be read as a formal riposte to the exhaustive, forensic audit—while also refusing any easy notion of recovering lost voices. Indeed, the fact that Tsafendas's words remain *unvoiced* accounts in large measure for the peculiar force of the work. Rather than undertaking the task of diagnosing this man, or making him explain himself, this open form uncouples words and historical subject, braiding his explicitly political motivations (“I thought this thing had gone too far / They have made an ideology out of it / The sexual part of it too”) together with long and cryptic disquisitions on his ailments, throwing into disarray the truth claims of either mode. When the text turns to the subject of the tapeworm, the strident Turkish music combined with images of sea creatures being gutted and an octopus in a tank create a particularly disturbing and uncanny sequence.

The text details the “very big mistake” made by Tsafendas’s stepmother when she flushed away the parasite that had come out of him as a young boy without showing it to him and without making sure that all of it was out: “I think it’s still alive in the sewers / Because it doesn’t die / It’s very strong / The Portuguese chemist was very angry / He said / Why did you throw it away? / But the sewer is still there / I want to study the sewer / Under the old house / I want to go back to the sewer.” Via a “screen memory” of grainy, flashing images, the biological otherness of marine life comes to stand in for the infamous, overdetermined tapeworm—much as the dream-work uses what Freud called the *Tagesreste* (the arbitrary “day’s remainders” or “residues”) for its obscure purposes, encoding latent meanings in the bric-a-brac of daily life (Freud, “On Dreams” 154).

The psychoanalytic vocabulary of condensation and displacement is apt here, for Siopis’s film generates an unpredictable and uncanny loading of apparently minor and random visual fragments. These everyday scenes are estranged and endowed with (in Freud’s words) a “psychical intensity”; and in a similar way, Mandela’s throwaway phrase accrues an unexpected resonance. It is the worm itself that now threatens to displace its host and becomes the obscure white messenger. And at a further remove, *Obscure White Messenger* parasitizes a foundational text of the new South Africa to hint at all those “useless” lives that might have been displaced by the heroic narrative of *Long Walk to Freedom*.

This dream-like aesthetic of indirection, substitution, and deferral makes Siopis’s work, I would suggest, one of the most powerful and provocative responses to the Tsafendas story. It shows too how the concept of “the documentary” can encompass vastly different forms. By refusing any direct footage of its subject (and any explicit attempt to portray the parasite that so obsessed him), the film generates a startling paradox: that Demitrios Tsafendas may be more fully “represented” here than in Key’s on-camera interviews with him in Sterkfontein Hospital. The mixed-media form is able to leave his message poised between sense and incoherence, at once utterly clear and terminally open:

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

V

Historical knowledge streams in unceasingly from inexhaustible wells. . . . The strange and incoherent forces its way forward, memory opens all its gates and yet is not open wide enough, nature struggles to receive, arrange and honour these strange guests. (Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* 73)

“A usable past” is a phrase that was popularized by the American literary critic and biographer Van Wyck Brooks in an essay in 1918. Writing in *The Dial*, he

opposed the conservative reflex by which scholars invoke the past to shame the present. Instead, he asks for a more dynamic and creative intellectual project in which the past is better imagined as “an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals; it opens itself at the touch of desire, it yields up, now this treasure, now that” (331). He goes on to pose a question that anticipates, albeit in a more utopian register, a range of critical theory in the 20th century: “If we need another past so badly, is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one?” (339).

Yet in my account—which holds in mind the more somber meditations of scholars like Adorno, Hobsbawm, and Coetzee—the idea of a usable past accrues a more dubious or difficult charge. While still arguing in the same direction as Brooks—for a creative engagement with the archival record—I have suggested that often its “strange guests” can be arranged and explained too quickly and glibly; that after a certain point, the impulse of postcolonial nationalism to retrieve a previously unvoiced history risks instrumentalizing lives that should properly retain more resistance to the designs of the present. The unusable past, in this sense, is a past that cannot be made to perform an immediately recognizable political gesture.

In exploring this idea, I have traced the actual and generic migrations of the transnational, radically unsettled, and finally (I would argue) incomprehensible life of Demetrios Tsafendas. “I went,” to quote Foucault’s “The Life of Infamous Men” once more, “in search of those sorts of particles endowed with an energy all the more great as they themselves are small and difficult to discern” (79). The aim has not been to recover a submerged or subaltern history, or at least not only that, but to track different artistic and formal strategies as they engage the apartheid archive, ranging across the nonfiction/fiction divide, between literary and visual culture, and between the symbolic demands of national allegory and the textured, contingent world of microhistory. We have seen how various forms try to narrate and “diagnose” Tsafendas and to what extent they are able to accommodate states of unknowability within his narrative.

The 1966 governmental report labors to metabolize coherence and closure from an event that, more than anything, may have signified an end to any politically ordained certainty within the Afrikaner nationalist project. Yet even within far more sympathetic accounts, we also see the risk of recasting into heroic form a life that should remain partly unreadable. In a passionate obituary on October 15, 1999, “Place in Heaven for an Unsung Hero,” John Matshikiza reflects on the uncertainty among black South Africans with regard to this assassin during the 1960s, but then replaces it with a post-apartheid certitude of his own: “Tsafendas killed Verwoerd because Verwoerd’s relentless need to place people in race-labelled 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” (*With the Lid Off* 170).

If such recuperation and retroactive politicization risks downplaying the role of Tsafendas’s very real mental disturbance, then other accounts are inclined to magnify it, or to transmute the idea of madness entirely into the realms of metaphor. Journalistic accounts often speak in terms of “a rational act in a country gone mad” (Robins 30), while the back cover of *A Mouthful of Glass* describes Tsafendas’s

“long exile from a society madder than he was.” This, I would argue, is to dilute the meanings of the word too far; so that when Van Woerden writes that this is a story in which “the power of madness” had shown itself equal to “the madness of power,” the chiasmus is too easy. At its most rhetorically assured, the text is least convincing.

Instead, the larger work suggests how one might see the assassination, “bizarrely enough, as an almost inconsequential or marginal event” (Van Woerden 93) and how the meanings of Tsafendas might be located in other parts of his biography. Rather than a “freakish footnote” in the liberation story, Tsafendas emerges as part of a much larger, global narrative. In one sense he is a precursor of the 21st-century figure with whom discourses of political economy and postcolonial thought must reckon more and more urgently: the migrant, the refugee, the asylum seeker. As a member of the “precariat”—those forced to live an unrelievedly precarious existence—his story anticipates how the modern nation-state can expel or refuse an individual without any thought as to whether she or he might be able to exist elsewhere with any level of safety, security, or dignity.

Beyond this, the works of Van Woerden, Vladislavić, Van Niekerk, and Siopis ask us to consider what one might call a *history of open forms*: cultural texts that preserve the unusability of the past as far as is possible within a narrative structure. And if, as Njabulo Ndebele has written, the death of apartheid must be seen not as an event but as a social process (93), then such works remind us what a long, uneven, and deeply subjective process this must be. In this, they share a quality of *writing out*—a phrase that I use in opposition to the idea of writing up. If the act of “writing up” connotes the act of too easily and prematurely fixing the meanings of the past (as in the case of a report, or indeed an academic thesis, often filed for a foreign or distanced audience), then “writing out” broaches an idea of the literary as process rather than product, with greater weight placed in the language event itself and in the *forms* of nonfiction narrative. That is also to say, such texts emerge from (*are written out of*) a densely autobiographical and personal matrix. Yet at the same time they are a means of working through (*writing their way out of*) a bitter and compromised past: of drawing its poison, of writing it out.

NOTES

1. The decision showed “an extraordinary failure of political and historical attention” on Zuma’s part, wrote the editor of the *Mail & Guardian*; in a year marking the centenary of the African National Congress, the “bombast of ANC historiography” had effectively “decocted the content of the Sharpeville story and filled up the vessel of Human Rights Day with the narrative of the charter and the governing party” (“Why Zuma Can’t Bury Sharpeville” 7).

2. See “Education System Worse than Under Apartheid.”

3. For some discussions of how the ANC under Thabo Mbeki used a more distant colonial past in politically expedient ways, see Hoard and Johnson.

4. This is the text as adapted by Beresford in his newspaper article “The Madness of Demetrio Tsafendas.” The original submission by Key to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (during the hearing into the apartheid judiciary on October 27, 1997) can be found online.

5. For a close analysis of these letters, see the path-breaking research by Adams.

6. See Thurman for a detailed treatment of the way that the Verwoerd assassination and the state pageantry surrounding the declaration of the Republic of South Africa in 1961 is refracted by Vladislavić's short-story cycle. Thurman also traces references to Tsafendas and the "polysemic symbol" of the tapeworm in the writing of Denis Hirson, John Matshikiza, Chris van Wyk, and Zoë Wicomb.

7. The phrase "flat prose" is from a 1993 interview with DeLillo, in which he describes the immense research project that underlays *Libra*: "There were times with Oswald, with his marine buddies and with his wife and mother, when I used a documentary approach. They speak the flat prose of *The Warren Report*" (qtd. in Bagley n.pag.).

8. In this sense it is part of an autobiographical triptych that also includes *Moenie Kyk Nie* (1993) and *Tikoes* (1996).

WORKS CITED

- Adams, Zuleiga. "Demetrios Tsafendas: Race, Madness and the Archive." Diss. University of the Western Cape, 2011. Print.
- Ballard, J. G. *The Atrocity Exhibition*. 1969. St. Albans, UK: Triad Panther, 1979. Print.
- Begley, Adam. "Don DeLillo: The Art of Fiction No. 135." *The Paris Review* 128 (Fall 1993): n.pag. Web. 1 July 2014.
- Beinart, William. *Twentieth-Century South Africa*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.
- Beresford, David. "The Madness of Demetrio Tsafendas." *Mail & Guardian* 31 Oct.–6 Nov. 1997: 23–25. Print.
- Breytenbach, Breyten. *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*. London: Faber and Faber, 1984. Print.
- Brooks, Van Wyck. "On Creating a Usable Past." *The Dial* 64.764 (11 Apr. 1918): 337–41. Print.
- Cavafy, C. P. "The City." *Collected Poems*. Trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992. 28. Print.
- Coetzee, J. M. *Life and Times of Michael K*. 1983. London: Vintage, 2004. Print.
- . "The Novel Today." *Upstream* 6.1 (Summer 1988): 2–5. Print.
- Davenport, Rodney, and Christopher Saunders. *South Africa: A Modern History*. 5th ed. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000. Print.
- DeLillo, Don. *Libra*. New York: Penguin, 1988. Print.
- "Education System Worse than Under Apartheid." *Mail & Guardian*. Mail & Guardian Online, 23 Mar. 2012. Web. 1 July 2014.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. 1969. Abingdon: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- . "The Life of Infamous Men." *Power, Truth, Strategy*. Trans. Paul Foss and Meaghan Morris. 1977. Sydney: Feral Press, 1979. 76–91. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "On Dreams." *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. New York: W. W. Norton, 1989. 142–71. Print.
- Giliomee, Hermann, and Bernard Mbenga. *New History of South Africa*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2007. Print.
- Gready, Paul. "Autobiography and the 'Power of Writing': Political Prison Writing in the Apartheid Era." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 19.3 (Sept. 1993): 489–523. Print.
- Hoad, Neville. "Thabo Mbeki's AIDS Blues: The Intellectual, The Archive, and the Pandemic." *Public Culture* 17.1 (2005): 101–27. Print.
- Johnson, David. *Imagining the Cape Colony: History, Literature and the South African Nation*. Cape Town: U of Cape Town P, 2012. Print.

- Kaplan, Robert. "Special Review: A Mouthful of Glass." *South African Medical Journal* 91.5 (May 2001): 395–96. Print.
- Key, Liza, dir. *A Question of Madness*. Keys Films, 1999. Film.
- Krueger, Anton Robert. *Living in Strange Lands: The Testimony of Dimitri Tsafendas*. New York: Playscripts Inc., 2003. Print.
- Mandela, Nelson. *Long Walk to Freedom*. 1994. London: Abacus, 2013. Print.
- Matshikiza, John, and Todd Matshikiza. *With the Lid off: South Africa Insights from Home and Abroad 1959–2000*. Johannesburg: M&G Books, 2000. Print.
- Mink, Louis A. "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument." *The History and Narrative Reader*. Ed. Geoffrey Roberts. London: Routledge, 2001. 211–20. Print.
- Naidoo, Indres. *Island in Chains: Indres Naidoo Prisoner 885/63*. Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2000. Print.
- Ndebele, Njabulo S. *Fine Lines from the Box: Further Thoughts About Our Country*. Roggebaai: Umuzi, 2007. Print.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Untimely Meditations*. Ed. Daniel Breazeale. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Cambridge UP, 1997. Print.
- Posel, Deborah. "The Assassination of Hendrik Verwoerd: The Spectre of Apartheid's Corpse." *African Studies* 68.3 (Dec. 2009): 331–50. Print.
- Renan, Ernst. "What Is a Nation?" *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1990. 8–22. Print.
- Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Circumstances of the Death of the Late Dr. the Honourable Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd*. Pretoria: Government Publications, 1966. Print.
- Robins, Jon. "The Assassin and the Tapeworm." *New Statesman* 27 Mar. 2000: 29–30. Print.
- Said, Edward. *Freud and the Non-European*. London; New York: Verso, 2003. Print.
- Shapiro, Michael J. "Partition Blues." *Alternatives* 27 (2002): 249–71. Print.
- Sher, Antony. *I.D.* London: Nick Hern Books, 2003. Print.
- Siopis, Penny, dir. *The Master Is Drowning*. 2012. Film.
- , dir. *My Lovely Day*. 1997. Film.
- . "Obscure White Messenger." *Contemporary African Photography from The Walther Collection: Appropriated Landscapes*. Ed. Corinne Diserens. Gottingen: Steidl Publishers, 2011. 197–207. Print.
- , dir. *Obscure White Messenger*. 2010. Film.
- , dir. *Verwoerd Speaks 1966*. 1999. Film.
- Spanoudes, Renos Nicos, and Anton Robert Krueger. *Living in Strange Lands: The Testimony of Dimitri Tsafendas*. New York: Playscripts Inc., 2003. Print.
- Thompson, Leonard. *A History of South Africa*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2006. Print.
- Thurman, Christopher. "'I Take Up My Spade and Dig': Verwoerd, Tsafendas and the Position of the Writer in the Early Fiction of Ivan Vladislavić." *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić*. Ed. Gerald Gaylard. Johannesburg: Wits UP, 2011. 46–69. Print.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Legal Hearing. 27–29 October 1997*. Truth and Reconciliation Commission, n.d. Web. 15 May 2015.
- Twidle, Hedley. "'In a Country Where You Couldn't Make This Shit Up?': Literary Non-Fiction in South Africa." *Beyond Rivalry: Fact | Fiction, Literature | History*. Spec. issue of *Safundi* 13.1–2 (2012): 5–28. Print.

- Van Niekerk, Marlene. *Triomf*. Trans. Leon de Kock. 1994. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1999. Print.
- Van Woerden, Henk. *A Mouthful of Glass*. Ed. and trans. Dan Jacobson. London: Granta, 2000. Print.
- Vigne, Randolph. *Liberals against Apartheid: A History of the Liberal Party of South Africa, 1953–68*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997. Print.
- Vladislavić, Ivan. *Missing Persons: Stories*. Cape Town: David Phillip, 1989. Print.
- “Why Zuma Can’t Bury Sharpeville.” *Mail & Guardian* 23–29 Mar. 2012: 7. Print.
- Wilson, Monica, and Leonard Thompson, eds. *South Africa: 1870–1966*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975. Print.
- Woolf, Virginia. “The Art of Biography.” *Collected Essays*. Vol. 6. Ed. Stuart. N Clarke. 1939. London: Hogarth Press, 2011. 181–89. Print.

