

# Dimitri Tsafendas Meets Dante, Friend and Witness of Our Time

Martina Di Florio

If Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco remind us that the act of reading is also an act of rewriting and cooperating with the author, Chariklia Martalas follows their lessons and interacts with Dante's *Divine Comedy* in a very sensitive and unique way. Seven hundred years later, and twelve thousand kilometers distant, a young student meets and befriends the medieval intellectual. Chariklia Martalas guides Dante to discover Apartheid and its tragedies, xenophobia, violence, and human hell. On this journey, Dante is a friend, one who is able to listen, empathize, and instill the confidence that words may still be carriers of human values. Martalas assumes responsibility of her position as a post-Apartheid reader and writer, and maintains the standpoint that it is indispensable to educate the world about what happened in South Africa. The crimes committed against humanity in the country must not be forgotten. Thus, the imperative of condemning the brutality that has poisoned history, and that continues to leave scarves on its pages, cannot be stressed enough.

In *The Literary Response to the Holocaust and the Transformation of the Reader into a Messenger*, David Patterson (2021, 2) states that “the tale belongs as much to the reader as it does to the author, with all the ethical implications of the transformation of the reader into a witness.” Patterson’s reflection, although related to the post-Holocaust literary production, is certainly applicable to post-Apartheid literature and its social responsibility of sharing and representing a collective trauma that, to partially heal, can only rely on a collective effort. With this

Martina Di Florio, Trinity College Hartford, United States, [martina.diflorio@trincoll.edu](mailto:martina.diflorio@trincoll.edu)  
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consideration of the interdependence between the writer and the reader as the starting point, particular attention must be paid to the reading approach. The reading process, indeed, allows the entrance in an environment often unknown, and it is the aesthetic stance that enables the reader to communicate with the text and participate in the construction of its meaning.

In agreement with Rosenblatt and his “transactional theory,” we can state that every act of reading can be described as an event in which the reader meets the text and establishes a transaction with specific meanings, able to activate a reservoir of experiences and memories. Therefore, the creative text produced by Chariklia Martalas, titled: *Eating John Vorster*, can be interpreted as the result of an act of “transactional reading and writing,” through which the established relationship of friendship and trust between the reader and the writer enables them to generate a series of transactions. It is this series of transactions that reinforces the writer-reader relationship in its turn. Thus, Martalas’s encounter with Dante results in the expression and sharing of an intergenerational trauma that crosses cultural and national borders, that is, the Apartheid trauma, which is still experienced at both a personal and a collective level. The continuous and active engagement with Dante’s text, therefore, engenders a series of associations, images, analogies, metaphors, and feelings that become the foundation for developing a highly original and personal text. This creative text can be shared with a transcultural and transnational community of readers, who are invited to spread the text’s ethical and activist message.

Martalas’s reading and interpretation of Dante’s masterpiece further enacts a process of transcultural writing that has at least two outcomes: the reworking and elaboration of a traumatic South African memory, and the transformation of the reader into a responsible witness and messenger. The traumatic memory of the writer, indeed, not only transforms the reader into a witness, but entrusts the latter with the ethical responsibility of being a messenger of a “singular message that brings with it a universal warning” (Patterson 2021, 2). Based on this observation, I argue that Chariklia Martalas establishes a personal relationship with Dante’s text as well as with the reader of the creative text produced. Indeed, the interpretation and the process of rewriting, while unfolding meanings and images still hidden in the original text, stimulate the reflection on the traumatic experience of Apartheid. The reader of Martalas’s work is therefore invited to share a message otherwise forgotten, or even unknown.

The text titled *Eating John Vorster* grounds itself in Dante’s *Inferno* 33 and brings to the surface the story of three men whose lives were tightly connected: Hendrik Verwoerd, John Vorster, and Dimitri Tsafendas. The reader finds the familiar images and characters of the *Divine Comedy* completely transformed, and discovers a new territory which, although invoking canonized images, unearths contemporary historical and political chapters that merit consideration and, above all, reflection. The new story evokes Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri, who suffer eternal damnation in Dante’s *Inferno*. Their pain, now transformed in the experience of Apartheid, is rewritten by a student whose family has Greek origins and lives in post-Apartheid South Africa.

When I interviewed her, Chariklia Martalas stated that the history surrounding Dimitri Tsafendas was the point of departure as well as the line of connection between Dante's *Commedia* and the creative text *Eating John Vorster*. Asked<sup>1</sup> about the personal relationship that she has with Apartheid and its consequences, Martalas answered:

Whatever race you are, Apartheid is a monstrous shadow into the present and effects every part of our lives. [...] The tragedy of Apartheid was a tragedy for my family like all families living under a brutal and merciless regime, but I wouldn't say it was a trauma. However, there are strange nuances in the midst of it such as there being some whites that were better than others in the eyes of the State, and the Greeks were definitely the lesser whites. It was not a desired community which is why many of my family on both sides were denied the opportunity to become immigrants to South Africa. However, it was also a community that wasn't invested in the country, apolitical as most came to seek economic opportunities but saw themselves as being tied to Greece rather than tied to South African soil. I still think this thread runs in the community even though some of my family members do not see us as immigrants with no South Africanness anymore. I certainly feel connected to South Africa. It is in this sense that I can explain the reason why I found the figure of Dimitri Tsafendas so interesting. He was a liminal character being born from a black mother and a Greek father and in many ways being Greek was liminal, let alone being mixed race though passing in appearance as Greek (or he would not have gotten a job in parliament).

These words elucidate that one of the most important motivations behind Martalas's work is her family's migration to South Africa. Whereas Apartheid is described in the interview as "a monstrous shadow into the present," the reader has to be aware that there are also "strange nuances" that need to be considered. One of these nuances is the missed representation of the Greek diasporic community of South Africa, a community that initially settled in Cape Town in the 1860s. In the years that followed, Greek migrants spread to other parts of South Africa, especially cities, among which Johannesburg became the "largest Greek community in Africa" (Theodoropoulos 1993, 126).

The parliamentary messenger Dimitri Tsafendas, portrayed in his trial as the insane murderer of the Afrikaner Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd—who is often referred to as the 'architect of Apartheid'—, takes centerstage in what can be also considered a theatrical text. Indeed, Tsafendas is a "man who has murdered [and] watch[es] over a murderer" (sup., p. 47) in Martalas's piece, and he abruptly interrupts Hendrik Verwoerd while the latter is eating John Vorster's head. Tsafendas enters the scene "in a prison uniform" (sup., p. 46) and is "deter-

<sup>1</sup> The exact question was: "*Eating John Vorster* can be interpreted as a text in which the Apartheid (and post-Apartheid) intergenerational trauma is expressed and elaborated. Do you, or your family and friends, experienced the tragedy of Apartheid and its consequences? Do you have a personal experience you can share?"

mined to meet Verwoerd's heart" (sup., p. 46). The reader witnesses the interruption of the anthropophagic action and assists Tsafendas in murdering Hendrik Verwoerd. The writer emphasizes the stabs, and uses words to amplify the cruelty as well as the determination of an action that seems to be necessary: "He stabbed him / He stabbed him four times / Quickly as if he rehearsed it" (sup., p. 46). Despite the brutality of the murder, the anthropophagic action perpetrated by Hendrik Verwoerd starts its course again without interruption. There is no chance to pause and feel empathy for the two main representatives of Apartheid, still united in death as they were in life. Hendrik Verwoerd, the 'architect of Apartheid,' cannot speak or express pain for the stabs he just received and is forced to continue to devour the head of John Vorster, who succeeded Verwoerd as prime minister from 1966 to 1978, and briefly held the presidency from 1978 to 1979. The punishment is also aggravated by the negation to express himself, for he cannot utter a single word: "He is not allowed a voice," (sup., p. 47) the text states, also adding that "[h]is crimes too great to ever use language to evoke your pity. His punishment forbids it" (sup., p. 46).

The negation of language, while making his circumstance parallel the brutality and monstrosity of the location in which he is situated, serves as a theatrical device to highlight Dimitri Tsafendas's voice. The words of the murderer, who becomes here an "unsung hero," (sup., p. 47) resound in the second part of the piece, where they stand in contrast with John Verdoerd's silence, unfolding a series of questions directed to the reader. Dimitri Tsafendas, in a monologue addressed to the two pilgrims, briefly summarizes his condemnation, the tortures that followed his imprisonment, and the motivations behind his action.

Far from offering a detailed reconstruction of the facts, the creative text *Eating John Vorster* embodies Martalas's belief in language, reading, and writing. She explains in the interview:

The power of language to realize a better world lies in the capacity for true language to cut the veil of our own delusions and show us reality as it is. I believe that language, when it is written truthfully, is a mirror, giving us a reflection that is difficult to accept not because it is wholly bad, but because like language it is itself ambiguous. This is why true language can cause such painful reflections; it shows us that we are undeniable creatures of purgatory and that it is up to us to transform ourselves. Language in its capacity to make us see things, not just to look but to recognize, proves to us our own responsibilities to the reflection we see before us. This is why great literature and philosophy are so transformational, they uproot you from your misconceptions and make you see yourself and your world vividly. It is ironic that language in its ambiguity is the only means we have to reach clarity.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The exact question was: "In *Eating John Vorster* you express the limits of language ("Unspeakable was the pain / Unmentionable was the alienation / Unspeakable was the destruction"). Do you think that writing and reading can help human beings to reflect and

The contrast between John Verdoerd without a voice and Dimitri Tsafendas speaking with the two pilgrims seems to furthermore overturn the media's representation of Tsafendas and the legal proceedings at the time of his prosecution. This depiction, far from representing him as a mentally ill man, apolitical, and unworthy of any sympathy, offers a different perspective on the assassin. Martalas, thus, presents a suffering man who, reminding the pilgrims that he is "not in Paradise," (sup., p. 47) states that he "cannot even climb the steepness of Purgatory" (sup., p. 48) because his "fate is with Verwoerd / [and] Justice is always a matter of intertwining" (sup., p. 48).

Martalas's elaboration of Tsafendas's story aligns itself with the recent volume published on his life in 2019, resulting from ten years of scholarly research done by Harris Dousemetzis. In his contribution, titled *The Man Who Killed Apartheid: The life of Dimitri Tsafendas*, the scholar exposes detailed facts and considerations based on legal records, reports, court hearings, news, and the general investigation undertaken at the time of the assassination. The book contributes to a more complex historical understanding. While the Apartheid government and its sympathizers in the far-right media remained tight-lipped about Dimitri Tsafendas's political activity and commitment against Apartheid at the time of his trial, they purposely depicted the parliamentary messenger as a schizophrenic who killed Hendrik Verwoerd because a tapeworm led to this action. Dousemetzis, on the contrary, argues that indignation and anger against the conditions of the South African black community were Tsafendas's motivations to assassinate Verdoerd, and vindicate the collective struggle against Apartheid.

The following reflections, expressed by Martalas during the interview, are interestingly in line with the main argument of Dousemetzis's book:

[H]e was also a political character that was connected to the injustices of Apartheid far more deeply than many other Greeks and I believe it was because he was on the periphery of Greekness, of whiteness, of the senses of self the State wanted to impose on people. It causes me a profound sadness that he is not recognized by my community and praised. It deeply upsets me that he is not seen as an exemplary member of the Greek community, and I believe he should be included in the community now in death. He was an outsider to an outsider white community and so 'in many ways' I identify with Tsafendas as that is how I feel within my own community and 'in many ways' how my immediate family feels in general' in terms of the community.<sup>3</sup>

Based on what has been said up to this point, the *Divine Comedy*, a canonical text in the Italian and World Literature, and on which the Italian national identity was built, opens itself to dialogue with the Apartheid tragedy. This tragedy affected

direct their actions toward the realization of a better world/society? It might seem like a dream (indeed, history shows us our failures), but do you believe in the power of language?"

<sup>3</sup> This reflection corresponds to the second part of Martalas's answer to the first question of the interview (see footnote 1).

South African families, and yet it transcends the South African borders. Violence, brutality, repression, pain, and disbelief are given voice, while old and new meanings intersect and interact at various levels. Dante's message is amplified, and the Italian medieval author, in *Eating John Vorster*, becomes the witness of "horror;" "murders of flesh and mind;" "hell [that] follows human beings" (sup., p. 45). But Dante also becomes a witness of a very important historical re-examination of the facts, and his text stimulates a political reflection capable of uncovering the great lies in South African history.

The creative text of Martalas, therefore, not only opens a new perspective on Dimitri Tsafendas, but corrects the distorted and corrupted representation that concerns him. The reader, while discovering a critical episode of Apartheid, becomes aware of how the facts and their depictions were manipulated and is, at the same time, implicitly called to be a responsible messenger of a true and informed message. Consistent with the statements made in the interview, Martalas takes the opportunity offered by this unique project on Dante to prove that language has the "capacity to make us see things, not just to look but to recognize, proves to us our own responsibilities to the reflection we see before us."<sup>4</sup> This interest in the transformational power of language, highlighted by the second response in the interview, is evident throughout the entire Martalas's production, which also offers insightful reflections on the impossibility of expression and on the limitations of language. In *Eating John Vorster*, for instance, the following three lines express the incapability to describe the crimes committed by Hendrik Verwoerd: "Unspeakable was the pain / Unmentionable was the alienation / Unspeakable was the destruction" (sup., p. 49).

The failure to describe and communicate the traumatic experience of Apartheid not only reflects the eloquence of silence, but corresponds to a meaningful consideration shared by Martalas in the following paragraph:

I believe the power of language is in its limits, I believe the power of language is in its silences. It is still a reflection, still a truth shown to us, but instead of words it's the inability to speak that truly allows us to grasp what has happened. It is the silence that makes us know that the horror that we encounter was not truly human because we would not be able to do justice to it if we recreated it in ordinary terms. This is when language needs to break, this is when new forms of expression need to emerge. But sometimes just acknowledging the silence I think is its own power, a sign of respect that the reflection is too great for our capacity to render it completely.

It is clear that Martalas's attention to the power of language grasps its multifaceted nature and acknowledges the power of silence. Words and silence intersect themselves in *Eating John Vorster*, revealing their fluidity and interdependence. The reader, horrified by the development of the episode at hand, is implicitly called to become a responsible witness and messenger.

<sup>4</sup> This statement is taken from the answer given by Chariklia Martalas to the second question of the interview (see footnote 2).

The imperative to describe unspeakable events, as well as to denounce a trauma that caused intergenerational scars, is certainly among the main motivations of the analyzed text. *Eating John Vorster* clearly dialogues with the other two texts written by Chariklia Martalas and included in the present project.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, when the writer focuses on the role of language and the transformational power of literature, there seems to be also a recurring preoccupation with the effectiveness of language to preserve and express human values and morality. While in *Eating John Vorster* a provocative passage tests the reader by asking: “Tsafendas didn’t doubt his morality / Why should he? / Why should we doubt his morality at all?” (sup., p. 48), in *The Party*, Francesca challenges Dante and Chariklia by saying: “But no one knows what is right especially not those philosophers thinking about virtue, especially not me. So we will have to see how the 21<sup>st</sup> century goes” (sup., p. 35). Along the same line, another meaningful question can be found in *The Dream or The Ghost of Ulysses* when Dante asks Chariklia: “So let me ask this. Is it virtue that guides your pen? Is it virtue that fills your words?” (sup., p. 43).

While it is undeniable that pain and trauma can be recognized as points of connection between the writer and the reader, and among different cultures (Caruth 1995, 11), Martalas’s exploration of virtue and morality seems to align itself with the classical acknowledgement of human vulnerability and limitedness. The Socratic epistemic vulnerability and the awareness that also the *logos* has its limits is a moral lesson that informs Martalas’s perspective on the role of literature as a medium to express human values and morality. Indeed, when asked about the role of virtue in the process of writing, Martalas stated:

In many ways I do believe that artists of all kinds have a responsibility to try creating something that is true and authentic. To actively resist deception and distortion. If this is the definition of what it means to have a pen guided by virtue, then I can possibly answer the question affirmatively. I do try to express what I believe has some truth to the human experience, but I also try to allow myself the scope of my ignorance without letting it paralyze me. Maybe it is the philosophy student in me, but I know that I do not know so many things, which is a frightening place to be when you write. So, I think like Socrates alludes that one might not ever be virtuous, but the attempt at being virtuous, the acknowledgement of one’s ignorance, is a way to be virtuous. So, this is a long-winded way of saying virtue guides my pen when I am honest that I do not know what it means but attempt at virtuous writing anyway. It’s the intention of fulfilling a responsibility to express what I believe is my true reality that I hope leads me to a state of being guided by virtue. I hope that this is enough to prove my strong sense of the ethical commitment to provoke reflection even if the only person reflecting is myself.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The four texts belong to a series titled *A Mad Flight Into Inferno Once Again*. In addition to *Eating John Vorster*, the three creative texts that complete Martalas’s contribution to the project are: *Canto XIII Now Smells Like Roses*; *The Dream of the Ghost of Ulysses*; and *The Party*.

<sup>6</sup> The exact question was: “Is it virtue that guides your pen?” (to quote what you wrote almost at the end of *The Dream of the Ghost Ulysses*).

Martalas's main objectives, therefore, are well grounded in a firm commitment to "resist deception and distortion" as well as in a strong conviction that the writer and the reader can be co-authors. Hence, the creative text *Eating John Vorster*, while becoming a valid and unique tool to illuminate on the traumatic events of Apartheid, otherwise forgotten or misconceived, can be transformed in a political space, or in a cathartic space of reflection.

The active engagement with Dante's text results in the activation, or re-activation, of a personal and collective basin of memories, reflections, and meanings. As Martalas's text proves, the outcome of this process is a relationship of trust and friendship with the author of the *Divine Comedy*. This friendship can be seen as the result of a transaction between the reader and the original text that, in this case, stimulates the production of another text and occurs "at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader" (Rosenblatt 1969, 45). Martalas herself clarifies how her relationship with Dante informed the process of writing:

Firstly, I believe having a friendship with the author by no means stops your capacity for your own interpretation of the text, but I think encourages it because you feel your interpretation is tied not only to the text itself but to the author as co-creator. [...] It is a friendship but ultimately a strange friendship for whatever side you are on' whether reader or writer' you will find yourself with silence with the other person in the friendship. As a reader I couldn't talk directly to Dante. But I think it is this silence that allows that imagination to blossom and create this beautiful dialogue that involves imagining another and extending oneself to another one who isn't in direct contact with you. It is an act of imaginative empathy that allows the reader or writer to feel connected in many ways with the unknown.<sup>7</sup>

To conclude, Chariklia Martalas's talent as a writer lies in her unique ability to engage the reader in the discovery of indescribable events, events that obscure history. As a writer, she is able to encourage the reader to believe in the power of language, literature, words, and silence. The experience of reading *Eating John Vorster* sheds light on the South African intergenerational commitment towards the realization of an active and responsible (global) citizenship. This citizenship should consider dialogue and reflection on past experiences of Apartheid as points of departure for imagining the possibility of a better future. If, for Chariklia Martalas, "[i]t is an act of imaginative empathy that allows the reader or writer to feel connected in many ways with the unknown,"<sup>8</sup> her creative text *Eating John Vorster* proves that this "imaginative empathy" has the power to cross the borders of time and space and to awake the consciousness of the reader, who is now the guardian and courier of a new message.

<sup>7</sup> The exact question was: "Do you think that the relationship between the reader and the author of a text can be defined as a friendship?"

<sup>8</sup> This quotation is taken from the previous quotation of Martalas's answer.



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