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Konstanze Baron
(Tübingen)

Vittorio Alfieri – A Self-Made Classic of the Enlightenment

In this paper, I would like to explore the classicism of Vittorio Alfieri (1749-1803). Alfieri was an aristocrat from Piedmont whose writings helped to inspire the Italian *Risorgimento*, the movement leading to national unification in the 19th century.¹ His oeuvre consists mainly of plays (both comedies and tragedies, though mainly the latter), yet he also engaged in political essay writing, satire, autobiographical prose and poetry. Alfieri is still an isolated and somewhat polarizing figure of the Italian canon, but he *is* an uncontested part of that canon – and has served as a central point of reference for Italian intellectuals ever since the French Revolution.²

Two aspects are noteworthy about Alfieri's classicism. The first one is fairly conventional; it concerns the purpose of his classicism. When Sainte Beuve wrote his famous 1850 essay *Qu'est-ce qu'un classique*, he stated: "Modern Italy had its classics."³ In his eyes, Italy seemed to be all set, while France was still searching. Curiously, however, the situation was exactly the reverse in the eyes of an Italian writer in the late 18th century. For

¹ Gaudence Megaro, *Vittorio Alfieri. Forerunner of Italian Nationalism*, London, New York 1930; Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism. A Study in its Origins and Background*, New York 1951, p.505.

² Giovanni Gentile: "L'Eredità di Vittorio Alfieri," *La Critica*, vol. XIX (1921), p.12ff.

³ "L'Italie moderne avait ses classiques". C.-A. Sainte Beuve, "Qu'est-ce qu'un classique," in *Causeries du lundi*, Paris, Garnier, [s.t.], 3^e édition, t. III, p.40. All translations of this text are my own.

even if Italy proudly looked to its *tre corone*, Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch, no such stellar figure appeared in the realm of theatre. In other words, there was no Italian playwright who could rightly lay claim to the title of being a ‘modern Italian classic’. Alfieri, once he had awoken to literary consciousness, felt this lack very keenly, and he set out to become that missing classic.⁴ In his autobiography, he describes how he explicitly formed the project of becoming a famous writer⁵ – famous meaning of course ‘authoritative’ in the field of tragedy. He made a contract both with his public (his future public, to be exact) and with himself that he would undertake the task of becoming Italy’s leading playwright.⁶ Alfieri is then, if anything, a very determined, a self-determined classic. To return once more to Sainte Beuve, he goes a long way to challenging the latter’s notion that “there is no recipe for the making of a classic.”⁷ For Alfieri formed the project of becoming a classic writer when he was a mere scribbler, a dilettante in the field of literature; he devised a rigorous training program that would allow him to achieve that goal, and he accomplished it. This voluntarism is the second, the more intriguing aspect of

⁴ The term ‘classic’ is used here, in accordance with OED, to designate “a writer [...] of the first rank and of acknowledged excellence”. The use of the singular noun is much more common in Italian than in English.

⁵ His exact words are: “I burned to bear off one day meritoriously the palm of the stage” / “[...] di conseguire un giorno meritamente una vera palma teatrale”; Vittorio Alfieri, *Vita. Scritta da esso*. Edizione critica della stesura definitiva, a cura di Luigi Fassò (= *Opere di Vittorio Alfieri da Asti*, vol. 1). Asti, Casa d’Alfieri, 1951, p.152. English translations are from the following edition: *The Autobiography of Vittorio Alfieri the Tragic Poet*, ed. and transl. by Charles Edwards Lester, second edition, New York, 1845. Present quote on p.138.

⁶ “[...] entrando nel duro impegno e col pubblico e con me stesso, di farmi autor tragico.” Alfieri, *Vita*, p.177. In a passage on p.145, he is even more explicit in his choice of words: “Formato in me tal proponimento, per legarmivi *contraendo* con una qualche persona *un obbligo di vergogna*” [emphasis added]. As Gisela Schlüter quite rightly points out in her commentary to the German edition of the *Vita* (Vittorio Alfieri, *Vita. Mein Leben*. Übersetzt, mit Anmerkungen, einem Nachwort und einer Bibliographie versehen von Gisela Schlüter, Mainz, 2010, p.477f. and 538ff.), the idea of a contract is typical of the Enlightenment. One normally finds it used – as for example by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom Alfieri admired – in political contexts; for the literary domain, Philippe Lejeune’s “pacte autobiographique” from 1975 comes to mind, but even this is nowhere as explicitly ethical as is the moral obligation that Alfieri imposes on himself.

⁷ “Il n’y a pas de recette pour faire des classiques.” Sainte Beuve, “Qu’est-ce qu’un classique,” p.49.

Alfieri's classicism, and the one that deserves a closer investigation from the point of view of the connection between the Enlightenment and classicism.

Writing against Authority: Alfieri's Cultural Politics

Yet before I turn to that investigation, let me say a few more things about the first, i.e. the more 'classical' aspect of Alfieri's classicism. Alfieri's classicism in the field of literature comes with a clear-cut political agenda. As so often the case when the notion of the 'classic' is involved, 'culture' and 'politics' are intimately linked, and the bridge between the two is the concept of the nation. The same holds true for Alfieri, who might be regarded as an early proponent of Italian national *Kulturpolitik* – long before there even was such a thing as an Italian nation. Yet Alfieri did envision that nation, as a unity, and he vigorously championed the project of national self-emancipation. Given the current state of affairs on the peninsula, this could only mean: freeing Italy from foreign rule, both cultural and political. Against this backdrop, Alfieri did not hesitate to endorse Machiavelli's rallying cry to "oust the barbarians" from Italy⁸ – the 'barbarians' being, ironically, the very harbingers of high culture in the (Northern) provinces of Italy. His impassioned call for a national classic, a truly 'Italian' classic that is, has to be seen in this very light. It is clearly and aggressively directed against the hegemony of the French language and literary models in Northern Italy (and beyond). However, freeing Italy from the barbarians was only the negative side of an even greater political project, the positive expression of which was the desire for political and indeed, personal, self-rule.

⁸ Chap. III.11 is called "Esortazione a liberar la Italia dai barbari", and Alfieri explains in a footnote: "Così intitolò il divino Machiavelli il suo ultimo capitolo del PRINCIPE; e non per altro si è ripetuto, se non per mostrare che in diversi modi si può ottenere lo stesso effetto." Vittorio Alfieri, *Del Principe e delle lettere*. In: *Scritti politici e morali*, vol. 1 (= *Opere di Vittorio Alfieri da Asti*, vol. 3). A cura di Pietro Cazzani. Asti, Casa d'Alfieri, 1951, p.249. For a more detailed analysis of Alfieri's relationship to Machiavelli, see Arnaldo di Benedetto: "Il Nostro Gran Machiavelli: Alfieri e Machiavelli," *Critica letteraria* 106 (2000), p.71-84.

Self-rule as such is a modern concept, associated with the (Kantian) notion of the subject. Yet it has important precedents in classical antiquity. The stoics for example insisted that a man who wanted to govern others must first of all be fit to govern himself. Prior to any notion of the subject in the modern sense of the term, these ancient thinkers strongly insisted on the link between a given political regime, i.e. the form and nature of government, and the ethos of its citizens. Their reflections centering on ‘civic virtue’ had been revived in the Italian Renaissance by authors like Niccolò Machiavelli, Francesco Guicciardini, and other prominent republicans. So when he searched for possible models of Italian self-rule, Alfieri not very surprisingly turned to the Roman republic, i.e. to classical antiquity, for inspiration. As it stands, Roman civic virtue is one of the key concepts in Alfieri’s political thought,⁹ and it is also what motivated his choice of tragedy as a genre. For tragedy, he believed, would help instill those civic virtues – badly needed as they were – in the Italian people and thereby lay the grounds for the project of national emancipation. In a letter responding to Ranieri de’ Calzibigi, Alfieri describes the political mission of theatre in the following terms:

I firmly believe that men must learn in the theatre to be free, brave, generous, enamored of virtue and intolerant of every form of violence, to love their country, to be aware of their rights and to be ardent, upright and magnanimous in their passions. [...] I write with only this hope: that perhaps on the rebirth of the Italians these dramas of mine will some day be presented. [...] To have a theatre in modern nations as in the old presupposes the existence of a true nation, not ten divided peoples who, though united, would be found to have nothing in common; then it presupposes education, private and public, culture, armies, commerce, navies, war, enthusiasm, fine arts. [...] The best protection of the theatre as of every lofty art and virtue would be a free people.¹⁰

⁹ Piero Gobetti, *La filosofia politica di Vittorio Alfieri*, Ripatransone 1995, p.69.

¹⁰ “Io credo fermamente, che gli uomini debbano imparare in teatro ad esser liberi, forti, generosi, trasportati per la vera virtù, insofferenti d’ogni violenza, amanti della patria, veri conoscitori dei proprj diritti, e in tutte le passioni loro ardenti, retti, e magnanimi. [...] Io scrivo con la sola lusinga, che forse, rinascendo degli Italiani, si reciteranno un giorno queste mie tragedie. [...] L’aver teatro nelle nazioni moderne, come nelle antiche, suppone da

Alfieri, not quite unlike Friedrich Schiller in Germany, looked to tragedy as an essentially political medium¹¹ – hoping that it would help spread among his contemporaries the desire for unity and freedom that would empower them to rid themselves of foreign domination.

So these are, very quickly, the basic ingredients of Alfieri's classicism. It is proudly anti-French¹² and just as passionately pro-self-rule. With the classics, Alfieri does not simply share his love of freedom; he also takes away from them a very strong sense of the connection between the personal (ethos), and the political (regime). Yet if it is true that, as Sainte Beuve also writes, the idea of a classic always implies a coherent legacy, something which is part of a bigger tradition and which persists over time,¹³ Alfieri's own self-proclaimed identity as a classic encounters problems of a peculiar nature, due to his violent rejection of two important principles, i.e. authority and genealogy. As one can easily detect from his political writings,¹⁴ Alfieri strictly resisted every kind of authority, not just that of the unbeloved foreigners. Unlike Machiavelli, whom he nonetheless emulated in more than one respect, Alfieri was not willing to compromise with despotic rule in the Italian territories. In his treatise *Del Principe e delle Lettere*, written between 1778 and 1786, he advised the local despots to protect

prima l'esser veramente nazione, e non dieci popoletti divisi, che messi insieme non si troverebbero simili in nessuna cosa: poi suppone educazione private e pubblica, costumi, coltura, eserciti, commercio, armate, guerra, fermento, belle arti, vita. [...] Ma il miglior protettore del teatro, come d'ogni nobile arte e virtù, sarebbe pur sempre un popolo libero." Vittorio Alfieri, "Risposta al Calzabigi," in *Opere di Vittorio Alfieri da Asti*, vol. 35. A cura di Morena Pagliani. Asti, Casa d'Alfieri, 1978, p.227f. Engl. transl. by G. Megaro (*op.cit.*), p.42f.

¹¹ Cf. Daniel Winkler, "Per non tradire, quantò è in me, la maestà e maschia sublimità della tragedia." *Körper, Revolution und Nation bei Vittorio Alfieri und im alfierianischen Theater der Sattelzeit*, Paderborn, 2016.

¹² Alfieri was also the author of an anti-French satire called *Il Misogallo*, which he set out to write under the impression of the French Revolution. On Alfieri's complex relationship with France and the French, see Jürgen von Stackelberg: "Gallophilie, Gallomanie, Gallophobie," *Romanische Forschungen* 105 (1993), p.384-391.

¹³ "L'idée de classique implique en soi quelque chose qui a suite et consistance, qui fait ensemble et tradition, qui se compose, se transmet et qui dure." Sainte Beuve: "Qu'est-ce qu'un classique," p.40.

¹⁴ Most importantly from the treatise *Della Tirannide*, which Alfieri composed in 1777.

the *lettere* – and the *letterati* not to accept any form of patronage that would impact their writerly freedom.¹⁵ Only a free literature / culture, according to Alfieri, is a good literature / culture.¹⁶ And although the empirical part of the treatise, in which he attempts to underpin his argument with examples from literary history, may be debatable in some respects, its dogmatic part could not be any clearer: A writer must not accept princely patronage except to allow himself to be corrupted by an authority other than his own.¹⁷ His personal *virtù* would suffer from such patronage, and with it he would lose his most important literary asset, his moral integrity.¹⁸

So Alfieri was acutely aware of the connection between politics and the personal ethos of the individual citizen or, to put it in more modern terms, between the type of government and the political culture of the nation (to be). Though his reflections on the topic are to be seen in the context of similar endeavors of the time (in France, Montesquieu, Madame de Staël, and Benjamin Constant had been or were also pondering the link between what we may very generally call ‘culture’ and politics),¹⁹ the situa-

¹⁵ According to Alfieri, the interests of the despot, who is more than anything eager to secure his own power, and those of the *letterati*, who stand in the service of truth and are committed to the general welfare of humankind, are structurally incompatible. He even calls them “naturali nemici,” natural enemies. Alfieri, *Del principe*, p.33. The motto of the whole treatise reads, in reference to Lucan: “*Virtus et summa potestas non coeunt.*”

¹⁶ Alfieri is here obviously trying to counter a notorious form of history-writing such as the one to be found in Voltaire’s *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, which identifies three classical ages of literature, all of which are directly connected to the figure of a ruler or of a ruling family, like Augustus, the Medici and Louis XIV.

¹⁷ “[L]a protezione principesca può forse giovare, o almeno non nuocere, alla perfezione delle lettere quanto alla lingua, e all’eleganza dei modi; ma [...] alla perfezione vera di esse, la quale nella sublimità del pensare, e nella libertà del dire si dee principalmente riporre, non solamente non giova, ma espressamente nuoce ogni qualunque dipendenza; cioè ogni protezione.” Alfieri, *Del principe*, p.149.

¹⁸ For Alfieri, it seems to go without saying that the most important qualities for a writer are ethical in nature: “[...] chiarissima cosa è, che alto animo, libere circostanze, forte sentire, ed acuto ingegno, sono i quattro ingredienti che compongono il sublime scrittore.” Alfieri, *Del principe*, p.202.

¹⁹ While Montesquieu in his *De l’esprit des lois* (1748) initially paved the way for this type of investigation, he did not himself treat the domain of literature as such. Madame de Staël’s *De la littérature* (1800) and Benjamin

tion proved particularly challenging to Alfieri. This is not only due to the fact that no Italian nation existed at the time of his writing. The Italian nation was still awaiting its creation; and Alfieri's uncompromising stance forbade him to place his hopes for the accomplishment of this important task on the despots in charge. Yet more importantly: If it is true that free political institutions require virtuous political mores and vice versa, there is a – potentially vicious – circle that has implications both logical and existential. Take the example of theatre: Theatre, especially of the tragic kind, is able to turn its spectators into free and proud citizens; not subjects but sovereigns in their own right.²⁰ To call for this kind of transformation was exactly the intent of Alfieri's letter to Calzibigi. Yet theatre, as an institution, already requires and thus presupposes the existence of free political institutions, a political climate which allows it to flourish and to accomplish its mission. In the absence of such an institutional environment – what is there to be done?

Being, as he was, far removed from political influence and utterly averse to political office, Alfieri made a personal choice of his own. 'Culture' would have to lead the way, even in the absence of political institutions that helped to create the desire for freedom and autonomy. In the eternal cycle of greatness and decline that accounted for much of the history of Western Europe (for Alfieri adhered to a rather traditional concept of history), change at this critical moment in time would have to come from the *letterati*, or, more precisely, from a very few of them who were strong and self-confident enough to stand on their own two feet, and who held moral convictions so unshakeable as to maintain their personal integrity even in the face of adversity. In his *Del Principe e delle lettere*, Alfieri had implicitly and explicitly laid down the characteristics of what he considered to be the ideal *letterati*: These individuals would be born with the most brilliant natural inclinations; they would be deeply steeped in a classical

Constant's "Fragmens d'un essai sur la littérature dans ses rapports avec la littérature dans ses rapports avec la liberté" (1817-1829) make explicit the link between political institutions and literature, especially freedom and literature, though they are not nearly as concerned with the problem of patronage as Alfieri is.

²⁰ Cf. f.ex. the crucial passage Alfieri, *Del principe*, p.120. On p.146 of the same work, Alfieri calls the *lettere* "a most efficient stimulant for freedom and virtue" ("efficacissima cagione di libertà e di virtù").

culture that nurtured in them the love of freedom and that allowed them to withstand the pressure as well as the lure of authority. They would be altogether independent enough, both financially and morally, to scorn princely patronage. They would, in other words, be entirely self-reliant people who owed nothing to others; they owed everything they were, everything they did, to themselves and only to themselves.²¹

The Making of a Classic: Alfieri's Self-Authorization in the *Vita*

This is – admittedly – quite a demanding job description, and nowhere in his treatise did Alfieri give any indications of how he thought this project might be realized. Yet he did set out, in 1790, to write his autobiography, and I would argue that the ensuing *Vita* plays an important part in the context of the political considerations outlined above. It is, as I will try to show in the remainder of this article, both a cornerstone of his political oeuvre, and the very foundation of his position as an Italian classic. For in the *Vita*, Alfieri draws his own moral portrait, and, more importantly, he describes his career as a writer. In a sum total of four *epoche*, he gives a detailed account of how in the most unfavorable of circumstances (from a political point of view) he rose to become an acclaimed playwright and Italy's leading tragedian – by choice, that is, thanks to a moral determination of his own. Nothing, no-one supported his career; many circumstances, of both an internal and external nature, were in fact against him; and yet, he managed to free himself from conditions that he felt to be both corrupting and degrading and to achieve moral purity as a precondition for literary success.

To show in somewhat greater detail how the *Vita* interacts with Alfieri's political writings, let me just rehearse a few important steps of the argument:

²¹ Alfieri puts this idea in a nutshell by saying that these authors would have to be “their own sons”: “I moderni scrittori adunque, che vorranno essere padri di verità, di virtù, di alto diletto, e fondatori di un nuovo secolo letterario, essere dovranno pria d'ogni cosa, *figli di sè medesim?*” [emphasis added]. Alfieri, *Del Principe*, p.242.

– *Birth*: Alfieri was, as already mentioned, born into a noble family of Piedmont. He is, then, an aristocrat by birth and, as he is careful to point out, also by temperament. He finds himself endowed with a certain fierceness of character, which goes along with an unusually high degree of sensitivity. As a result, he is both shy and obstinate, socially awkward and resentful of any kind of authority, yet loving and deeply affectionate with whomever deserves such affection.²² From the beginning of his life, Alfieri tells us, he displayed “a natural tendency to justice, to equality, and to generosity of soul, which,” as he immediately adds “constitute the elements of a being free or at least worthy of being so.”²³ His noble birth made him financially independent²⁴ all the while placing him among the great persons of the realm; yet more than mere circumstance, freedom to him seemed to be an inner necessity. If we were to sum up his self-characterization, we might say that Alfieri, as he describes himself, was *born* for freedom although he was in fact subject to Vittorio Amedeo III, King of Piedmont. With hindsight, one might also say that he was born to be a poet although he was not aware of it for a long time: The first chapters of the *Vita* describe him as a melancholy youth, highly susceptible to the influence of music yet prone to musing and dark spirits. He tried to kill himself when he was barely eight years old but luckily survived the attempted suicide.

– *Education*: From an educational point of view, the circumstances of Alfieri’s childhood and youth were dire indeed. In his close family, there was no-one who might have introduced him to the benefits of culture, let alone to books, although he grew up with an uncle²⁵ who was an architect and thus not totally averse to the arts. At least, his relatives took him to the opera once or twice where he had an opportunity to listen to music and

²² For a poignant summary of his temperament and its inherent contradictions, see the beginning of chapter I.4.

²³ “[...] una certa naturale pendenza alla giustizia, all’egualianza, ed alla generosità d’animo, che mi pajono gli elementi d’un ente libero, o degno di esserlo.” Alfieri, *Vita*, p.58. Engl. transl. p.60.

²⁴ “Il nascere agiato, mi fece e libero e puro; nè mi lasciò servire ad altri che al vero.” Alfieri, *Vita*, p.9.

²⁵ Count Benedetto Alfieri. Alfieri describes him as an admirer of ancient beauty and of Michelangelo, though in his own works he often compromised his lofty ideals to accommodate the taste of his contemporaries.

feel his sensitivity awaken.²⁶ At school, the situation was even worse: Bad teachers, completely outdated curricula, not a thinking soul around. Alfieri spends the entire second and third books of his *Vita* bemoaning the effects of his poor education. Not only did he not learn anything; he also had to cram his head full of useless information, rehearsed mechanically, without the slightest notion of context or practical application. As a result, at age ten, he was – in his own words – “an ass among asses, and under an ass for a teacher.”²⁷ His trajectory appears to be the exact opposite of that of a *Bildungsroman*: Instead of flourishing in his education, Alfieri was actually regressing; he kept going from bad to worse. The verdict he passes on the academic institutions of his time is simply damning; other educational conventions, like the *grand tour* he accomplished like any young gentleman of the time, do not fare any better. It is true that Alfieri did travel a lot, but he travelled in a completely senseless way. His travels took him to distant countries yet failed to teach him anything about himself. And even when he was travelling in his native Italy, he moved around in a mentally distracted fashion, passing by monuments (like the tomb of Petrarch) the cultural significance of which completely eluded him. All of this, according to the mature Alfieri, was a supreme waste of time.²⁸

– *Love, both true and false*: Young Alfieri’s love relationships were like mirror images of his travels: transient and completely devoid of intellectual or moral import. Being the passionate young man he described, Alfieri was naturally responsive to the charms of physical beauty, yet his various mistresses did not match him from the point of view of character and intellect. Quite the contrary, in love, just as in his studies, he seemed to be

²⁶ In a noteworthy passage in II.5 (Alfieri, *Vita*, p.42), Alfieri relates the stimulating effect of music on his “ears and imagination,” and he goes on to add: “A wild ebullition of whimsical ideas followed, and I should have written the most vivid lines had I not been unknown to myself and to those who pretended to teach me.” (Engl. transl. p.46). It is one of many instances in which he describes the arousal of his sensitivity as a kind of premonition of his poetic talent, which however goes undiscovered for want of “nourishment and excitement.”

²⁷ “[...] asino, fra asini, e sotto un asino.” Alfieri, *Vita*, p.30. Engl. transl. p.36.

²⁸ “Ed ecco in qual modo si viene a tradire senza rimedio la gioventù.” Alfieri, *Vita*, p.31.

engaged in a steady downward path eventually finding himself attached to a particularly unworthy lady.²⁹ Alfieri himself vividly resented this bond to which his noble mind could not give its consent; it was like slavery to him, and he repeatedly tried to restrict the empire of his mistress. Failing, as he did, to extricate himself from this “filthy labyrinth,”³⁰ he experienced the most vivid shame.³¹ A bottom had obviously been reached: “the chain galled me to the bone, but I could not break it.”³² And yet it was precisely at this moment of highest moral dejection that he also started to feel the pangs of conscience reminding him that there was another more worthy way of life.³³ Consequently enough, then, though still somewhat paradoxically, it was at the sickbed of this same, despicable mistress that Alfieri had his first literary inspiration. He drafted what would become his first tragedy³⁴ while keeping her company when she was taken ill; and, being himself still too weak at this time (morally speaking) to follow through with his noble resolution, discarded the manuscript for the time being. Yet that fatal evening things took a new turn, never to be the same again; he had, as it were, initiated a new relationship. After several failed attempts, Alfieri had encountered what he would henceforth call his ‘true love’ (*amore vero*), the love of study and of writing, the love of letters.

²⁹ Elena Margherita Gabriella Falletti di Villafalletto. Though of distinguished birth, this lady was “of none too good a name even in the gay world” (“di non troppo buon nome nel mondo galante”). Alfieri, *Vita*, p.138. Engl. transl. p.126. She was married and quite a bit older than Vittorio. Their relationship lasted from mid-1773 to February 1775.

³⁰ “[...] quel sozzo laberinto.” Alfieri, *Vita*, p.140. Engl. transl. p.128.

³¹ The notion of shame (*vergogna*) is reiterated throughout the chapters of *epoca terza*. It testifies to Alfieri’s great moral sensitivity, which makes it impossible for him to suffer the discrepancy between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ any longer.

³² “[...] libero avrei voluto trovarmi, ma liberarmi non sapea, nè potea.” Alfieri, *Vita*, p.144. Engl. transl. p.131. At one point Alfieri, in his distress, caused his trusted manservant Elia to tie him to his chair, and so keep him a prisoner in his own house. This passage, which ironically echoes the famous episode of Ulysses resisting the sirens, conveys a deeper insight into the nature of autonomy: The “vili cattene” of the unworthy love have to be fought with another kind of chains before it becomes possible to shed them.

³³ In the logic of the narrative, Alfieri’s love-sickness functions as a kind of crisis, the resolution of which takes his life onto a new stage.

³⁴ The *Cleopatra* – a kind of tragic dialogue written in Italian blank verse.

The first three books of the *Vita* describe the trials and tribulations of a young man who does not live the life that corresponds to his mind and character, though it may have been, by the standards of the time, suited to a man of his age and social station. Alfieri's autobiography is based on the structural difference between the author/narrator, writing/telling his story at a mature age, and the protagonist, young Vittorio. This discrepancy accounts for many of the ironies of the narrative some of which are truly amusing; yet all this irony and self-mockery cannot entirely camouflage the bitterness that Alfieri feels with respect to his own misguided life. He sees himself as a very gifted young man endowed by nature with the finest of talents and, what is even more important, with the most noble of characters. Due to social circumstances, due also to his own weakness of will and the dissipations afforded by his station in life, these talents go completely wasted. Yet with the moral crisis described above a turning point is reached in the narrative, and book IV opens with the solemn contract in which Alfieri pledges to become a great writer. The rest of the book is devoted to the new project, which is not just the story of an intellectual vocation finally found but that of an all-encompassing project of self-reform. Again, I can only survey the important episodes in the most cursory fashion:

– *Reform of life*. When Alfieri decides to become a writer, he is fully aware that he is not simply opting for a particular career but for an entire way of life. As a consequence, the so-called *conversione letteraria* is followed by a radical reform of his personal situation and conduct.³⁵ First of all, Alfieri starts by renouncing his family fortune which tied him to the kingdom of Piedmont. He gives up his estates at Asti to his sister Giulia, reserving for himself only a modest monthly pension. The motivation behind this rather daring and unusual decision³⁶ was for him to become a free man not just in the moral, but also in the political sense of the term. While he was the owner of his title and estate, he was also a servant to the King, one of those petty

³⁵ There is a striking parallel with Rousseau, who describes a similar 'reform' of his way of life in book VIII of the *Confessions* (first published in 1782).

³⁶ Unusual only in this context. Alfieri's act of self-divestment actually resembles the arrangements members of the aristocracy would make before taking vows.

Italian despots who did not think it beneath himself to interfere with the private lives of their subjects. Getting rid of his properties was therefore part of a general endeavor on Alfieri's behalf to thoroughly 'de-vassalize'³⁷ himself. It was his conviction that as a writer he needed to be free, free to move and to travel whenever he saw fit, and, more importantly, free to follow the dictates of his own writerly conscience without any political concerns or reservations.

– *Marriage*: Yet Alfieri's self-chosen freedom, radical as it may seem, is not of the errant type. After ending his unfortunate love affairs, he encounters and eventually marries Luise Stolberg, the Countess of Albany, a lady not just of noble birth but of actual personal worth whom he praises in the most exalted terms. Although she is – unhappily – married to an abusive husband, the two of them become engaged and set up a household in Tuscany, which is later formalized by matrimony. Though once again this relationship is not an easy one, due to the personal circumstances of the lady, Alfieri in this case has no mental reservations at all.³⁸ The Countess is entirely deserving, being herself a person of great moral and intellectual qualities; as such, she is not a rival to his 'true love', the love of letters, but on the contrary, she fuels and supports it. Thanks to his relationship with her, Alfieri is finally able to channel his energies into the literary project in a productive fashion. Instead of arbitrary freedom, this is freedom bound in the most useful of ways.

– *Education, once again*: Ironically, however, Alfieri is totally unfit for the great task he has set out for himself.³⁹ Due to the time misspent during his youth, he is still a full-fledged barbarian with respect to literary culture. This unfitness starts at the most basic level, the level of language: Alfieri masters the local dialect

³⁷ "disvassallarmi" – one of many neologisms. Alfieri, *Vita*, p.212.

³⁸ The *Vita* remains silent on what must have been the difficulties of the relationship, which nonetheless appears to have been a reasonably happy one. Towards the end of Alfieri's life, the Countess began a relationship with the painter François-Xavier-Pascal Fabre, with whom she spent the remainder of her years.

³⁹ In a lengthy passage at the very beginning of the fourth period, Alfieri takes stock of his qualifications as a tragic playwright thus laying bare in an ironic fashion the painful discrepancy between his ambition and the means available to him.

and (some of) the French language in which he was educated at school. But he is completely unfamiliar with the canon of Italian literature and even incapable of reading it. What is therefore needed – and Alfieri does not shy away from the consequences, humiliating as they may be – is a project of thorough (self-)education; it must start from zero – or worse, since before he can begin to build, he first of all has to *undo* the nefarious education he received in his youth.⁴⁰ Alfieri describes how, as an adult, he has to become a humble student again in order to make himself familiar with the literature to which he has decided to devote his life. He hires instructors who teach him first Italian and, a little later, Latin, and who introduce him to the classics⁴¹ – some of which he had perused superficially before but which he now reads again with a new interest and much keener understanding. His readings⁴² are accompanied by extensive annotations, which soon give way to his first literary essays. In the beginning, Alfieri composes his pieces in French and translates himself back into Italian; he experiments with verse, trying to adapt a genuinely Italian meter (the so-called *versi sciolti*) to his own tragic needs.⁴³ He frequently consults with friends; in the spirit of complete honesty and reciprocity, he submits his writings to the verdict of a few intimates.⁴⁴ As his career progresses, he resumes his travels

⁴⁰ The ‘undoing’ aspect concerns most of all his relation to the French language. Alfieri at first categorically avoids every kind of French reading and banishes from his life whomever would be likely to speak to him in that idiom (Alfieri, *Vita*, p.180); when he starts to realize that this will not be quite enough to ‘un-frenchify’ himself, he decides to move to Tuscany to be more thoroughly exposed to standard Italian (p.190).

⁴¹ For example, Alfieri studied Horace with the help of Carlo Denina, a historian from Turin. In chapter 2 of the *quarta epoca*, Alfieri describes how the two of them meticulously translated, analyzed and discussed first all of the Horatian *Odes* and then the *Ars poetica*. Other Latin readings include Virgil, Seneca, Livy, and Sallust.

⁴² “[...] mi posi all’impresa di leggere e studiare verso a verso per ordine d’anzianità tutti i nostri Poeti primari” (Alfieri, *Vita*, p.186). The Italian authors Alfieri repeatedly references throughout the *Vita* and whom he calls his “four great Luminaries” (“quattro gran luminari”) are Dante and Petrarch as well as Tasso and Ariosto.

⁴³ Cf. p.193f. For a genetic critique of Alfieri’s poetic style, see Vittore Branca, *Alfieri e la ricerca dello stile. Con cinque nuovi studi*, Bologna, 1981, esp. p.1-20.

⁴⁴ At p.186, Alfieri acknowledges his debt to Father Paciaudi and Count Tana for their support and upright criticism. The notion of friendship – itself a classical notion – is very important in the *Vita*. Alfieri celebrated his

(to Rome, for example), though unlike before, he now travels with a clear-cut purpose. In his quest for a personal style of expression, he even agrees to meet with professional linguists at the university of Pisa. Yet with respect to these alleged authorities, whom he refers to as *barbarossi* (a mix of the terms for ‘barbarian’ and ‘professors’), Alfieri’s attitude is more than just ambivalent:

We were not agreed. What I called feeble and trivial, they called flowing and musical; as for the blunders, being pure matters of fact, and not of taste, there could be no dispute. Neither in matters of taste did we dispute; for a marvel, I maintained my part as a learner as they did theirs as teachers. But I was firmly resolved to be satisfied myself. Those gentlemen taught me negatively what *I must not* do. Time, exercise, perseverance, and study, I flattered myself, would finally teach me what *I must* do.⁴⁵

The academics can only teach him the mere rules of grammar; that is, they can offer him advice on what mistakes he ought to avoid. But they cannot teach him how to write good literature; this is something, Alfieri knows, will have to come from his own heart, from the very marrow of his own poetic nature. Being a tragic poet is not something that is taught in the academies; it cannot be, given that it is so very intimately connected with the writer’s personality and ethos.

Summing up, we may say that Alfieri’s education is a self-education in the twofold sense of the term: He has to educate himself, to refine his own person and style, while he is also the one who is doing the educating. Although he does seek counsel and advice, whenever such advice is needed, Alfieri remains wary

long-time friend Francesco Gori in *La virtù sconosciuta*, a dialogue first published in 1788.

⁴⁵ “Non c’intendevamo. Io chiamava languido e triviale ciò ch’essi diceano fluido e sonante; quanto poi alle scorrezioni, essendo cosa di fatto e non di gusto, ni ci cadea contrasto. Me neppure su le cose di gusto cadeva contrasto fra noi, perchè io a maraviglia tenea la mia parte di discente, come essi la loro di docenti: era però ben fermo di volere prima d’ogni cosa piacere a me stesso. Da quei signori dunque io mi contentava d’imparare negativamente, ciò che non va fatto; dal tempo, dall’esercizio, dall’ostinazione, e da me, io mi lusingava poi d’imparare quel che va fatto.” Alfieri, *Vita*, p.193. Engl. transl. p.150.

of any kind of authority. The only authorities he accepts are the classics, both Italian and Latin. But even with respect to these, he is full of circumspection. For on the one hand, he allows them to kindle his enthusiasm and to inflame him with a love of glory and greatness; he deliberately steep himself in classical reading with a view to absorbing these authors' mode of feeling and thinking into his own being.⁴⁶ On the other hand, however, he is extremely jealous to develop his own style of writing. Whenever he embarks on a new work the topic of which he knows has been dealt with before, he discards the earlier writer for fear of being unduly influenced.⁴⁷ His then is a careful balancing act: All the while seeking education and inspiration, he almost aggressively rejects whatever might become an unacknowledged debt and a falsification of his own way of feeling, reasoning, and writing.

Coming Full Circle: Alfieri's Classicism in Perspective

It is my understanding that the *Vita* as a literary work completes our picture of Alfieri's classicism in two significant ways. In one sense, it confirms what we already know about the purpose of this classicism. The recourse to authors from classical antiquity provides Alfieri with a motif of freedom and political greatness, which as such belongs to a past long gone but which he now seeks to revive for the Italy of his own time, or more precisely, for an Italy of the future. Classicism as an ideal, as an identity, may be anachronistic, but it is anachronistic in a good way, holding, as it does for Alfieri, a promise for the future, which the present generation of writers needs to live up to. Within this greater scheme of things, the *Vita*, as the description of his own writerly life and career, has an important function. It provides compelling proof that it is possible to be the – truly exceptional – person required by Alfieri's political theory. It shows that the demands of being an autonomous, entirely self-

⁴⁶ Alfieri is after all not averse to learning poetry by heart, as the passage on p.196 shows, where he is literally trying to infuse himself with Italian poetry (“per invasarmi di forme poetiche”).

⁴⁷ Thus, Alfieri states about Shakespeare: “Ma quanto più mi andava a sangue quell'autore, [...] tanto più me ne volli astenere.” Alfieri, *Vita*, p.195. Literary critic Harold Bloom has coined the term “anxiety of influence” (1973) for this kind of attitude.

reliant intellectual can be met even when circumstances are not very favorable. Hence, no-one should blame the poor state of the educational system when Alfieri's own experience so aptly demonstrates that it all depends on the moral courage of the individual, that self-reform is an option at all times – provided that the ethical (and, one should add, the financial) foundations are there from the start.⁴⁸ In this sense, the *Vita* acts as an analeptic supplement⁴⁹ to the political works: It testifies to the personal ethos that is implied and even presupposed by the treatises.

Furthermore, and this is my second point, the *Vita* also fulfills a proleptic function with respect to Alfieri's future position as a classic-to-be of Italian literature. The narrative itself reflects this by means of a rather cheeky twist: The final section concludes with Alfieri deciding that after all his pains and troubles, after 28 years of relentless studies, he finally deserves a reward. He therefore invents a knightly order, which he significantly calls *l'ordine d'Omero* (the Order of Homer) and solemnly awards himself knighthood (or the 'palm', which he initially set out to win). The medal is designed – how could it be otherwise – by Alfieri himself; it features the names of twenty-three poets of antiquity and modernity and a Greek inscription also devised by the author (Who hastens to tell the reader that he had the Greek proofread by a learned friend, to make sure he did not commit any blunders). Of course, this final award ceremony, which mimics Petrarch's coronation as poet laureate, is profoundly ironic. Or is it?⁵⁰ For Alfieri's self-coronation, mocking as its tone may

⁴⁸ In cases where these foundations are lacking, the Alfieri of *Del Principe* kindly but firmly advises the aspiring author to go look for another type of occupation. In the *Vita*, Alfieri relates how he subjects himself to a thorough self-scrutiny in order to better understand the nature of his own poetic talent and – more importantly – its limitations (p.191f.). The 'know thyself' is thus a very important element of Alfieri's self-education; the study of himself complements, and indeed sustains, the study of others.

⁴⁹ Gaudence Megaro (*op.cit.*, p.71) calls the *Vita* an 'appendix' to the political works; this, however, in my view grossly understates the complexity of the issue at hand.

⁵⁰ The secondary literature on the *Vita* features a broad variety of interpretations from the "agiografia del vate" (M. Martrinelli) to overridingly satirical readings. Doerte Winter in her monograph ('*Come farsi eroe letterario*'. *Die 'Vita' Vittorio Alfieris als intertextuelles Bezugssystem*, Frankfurt a. M. 2000) draws an instructive parallel between the Alfieri of the *Vita* and his conception

be, seems rather in line with the voluntarism he displays throughout the book. So, we might wonder, is Alfieri not merely pushing a familiar theme to its extreme consequence, demonstrating that he does not really need a public to endorse him, that he is enough of a jury to himself?

I believe that what we are detecting here is a strange ambivalence in Alfieri's work and maybe his (only) weak spot. For no one, no matter how determined he is, may become a classic of his own devising. A classic always needs an audience, and one that – as Sainte Beuve reminds us – persists over a long period of time. No matter then how strong an author's control over the production of his work might be, there is always another side, namely that of its reception, and which extends beyond his immediate resonance among his contemporaries to a time when he will no longer be around. This may be a good thing or a bad thing, but it definitely is something that escapes control. The future is open and so is the writer's position in it. Alfieri himself lived long enough to experience this first hand, when the outbreak of the French Revolution completely altered the way in which his political writings were received, and in a sense that was not always agreeable to him.⁵¹ With this in mind, the irony of the final passage may, after all, be just a way of immunizing himself against the vagaries of reception.

But then again, maybe this is not the right question to ask. Perhaps the real import of the *Vita* is an altogether different one. My suggestion is the following: Faced with the potentially vicious circle of royal authority and moral decline, Alfieri devised a circle of his own, a literary circle, or 'ring'.⁵² In this circle, the

of the tragic hero; however, her emphasis on the author as his own protagonist misses the crucial point, which is Alfieri's self-authorization as a writer.

⁵¹ In 1801, an unauthorized version of his early works (including the political treatises) was published in Paris. By that time, Alfieri had long turned against the French and their Revolution, and he very much resented the idea that his own writings should be appropriated by that nation and in that context.

⁵² In doing so, he may well have been inspired by Dante, whose works cover a similarly broad (or even broader) range of topics and genres from the treatise *De Monarchia* to the autobiographical *Vita Nuova*, which, written at an early stage of his career, abounds with very interesting strategies of self-authorization, as Albert Ascoli has shown (*cf.* Albert Russell Ascoli,

political and the personal writings complement each other in such a way as to provide an almost auto-poetic foundation to the tragedies, which represent the literary core of his work and that part of it which he is still acclaimed for to this very day. These tragedies illustrate the valiant – though always lonely – hero's fight against despotism; they represent a sublime enterprise, for sure, but one which would be entirely futile were it not to accomplish its political mission of inspiring generations of young people with lofty ideas and with the courage to take up the fight on their own.⁵³ And this is exactly the moment, conceptually speaking, where the political treatise and the *Vita* come to bear. The treatises – both *Del principe e delle lettere* and the earlier *Della tirannide* – provide a critical analysis of the current historical situation while also proposing a political agenda, an agenda that centrally rests on the figure of the self-reliant intellectual.⁵⁴ The *Vita* in turn shows Alfieri to *be* that very intellectual presupposed by the treatises; and it endows him with a genealogy that traces all his merits back to his noble birth and subsequent self-education. As a public figure, this carefully construed circle (literary, personal and political) provides him with enormous credentials – in fact just the kind of credentials that were necessary for him to be able to act as an authority for the nation to be.

For Alfieri, then, classicism was more than just a useful tool; it was an atmosphere he breathed and an identity that he deliberately chose for himself. This identity, which affects both the literary and the ethical part of his persona, might easily have seemed out of date even at the time of his writing. But it obviously did not, which arguably has to do with the fact that he also modernized it in quite a significant way. Whereas for 'classical'

Dante and the Making of a Modern Author, Cambridge, 2008). However, Alfieri differs from Dante in that the latter tries to situate his own authority as a poet with respect to previously established, uncontested authorities such as God or the Emperor whereas Alfieri's authority, as this section argues, is almost entirely self-referential.

⁵³ Cf. the passage in Alfieri, *Del principe*, p.233: "vorrei che tanta e tal guerra, e sotto così diversi aspetti, movessero alla assoluta ingiusta e mortifera potestà, che dalla loro divina fiamma venissero essi poi, quando che fosse, ad incendiare le intere nazione."

⁵⁴ The ideal of the self-reliant intellectual was subsequently celebrated in the 19th century by the American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay on "Self-Reliance" (1841).

classicism, authority and genealogy are two indispensable components, these were exactly the features that Alfieri struggled with; or should we say: that he rejected, given that they were incompatible with his unqualified love for freedom. Alfieri surely wanted to be an authority of his own, but he did not want to heed any other authorities. What he did therefore, was to prepare the grounds, by means of the above-mentioned circle, for becoming a truly self-supported literary authority. His authority does not rest on genealogy; neither does it rest on the imitation of some external standard of excellence. It simply rests on him being true to himself, with his political oeuvre reflecting back the personal and vice versa, and both of them supporting and supplementing the literary. So instead of paying tribute to inveterate authority, like all classics before him, he preferred to discard authority altogether and to replace it with what was to become another key quality of modernity, i.e. authenticity.