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THE TEXTUALIZATION OF OEDIPUS IN VITTORIO ALFIERI

JULIANA SCHIESARI

Vittorio Alfieri's tragedy *Antigone* is not simply a work of art completing the teleological process of genre fulfillment, i.e., the tragedy, but rather a poetic statement of the author's own personal anarchistic temperament. The origins of such a temperament can be discerned through a psychological interpretation of Alfieri's *Vita*, keeping in mind, however, that the autobiography too, when considered as a genre presents an instance of writing unique for the degree of ambiguity contained in its purported sincerity. Nevertheless, the inter-relationship of author, text and reader creates certain dynamics which are the focus of this paper.

Antigone deals with universal and ethical problems, and a historical analysis of the various Antigones would reveal that each author conceived his work in relation to the social, political and moral problems which concerned him during the time in which he lived. If one glances at the differences between Sophocles' character Antigone and Alfieri's, one is struck by the ideological considerations which differentiate each play. The principal argument in Sophocles' work is the question of laws. That which appears to be an act of lawless rebellion by the Sophoclean Antigone proves in the end to be guided by a superior law to which she gives unswerving allegiance. She is inspired, not by a passionate hatred for Creon but by an impassioned desire to obey the laws which

govern all of nature and men. Alfieri's *Antigone* is not governed by any laws. Her act of defiance stems from a desire to free herself from social criteria which impinge upon her individualistic freedom and by a morbid desire to unite herself with her dead brother. The dominant trait which characterizes Alfieri's *Antigone* from the beginning is her hatred for Creon.

Passion, and impulse, elements characteristic of Alfieri's temperament, are expressed through his tragedies. These qualities unite in Alfieri and, one shall see, will define him as a hero of absolute individualism. In order to understand these characteristics it becomes necessary to focus upon the significance of his "death wish", of which he has given a detailed account in his *Vita*.

Alfieri describes his character in the first years of his life as "taciturno e placido, per lo più, ma alle volte loquacissimo e vivacissimo; e quasi sempre negli estremi contrari."¹ This description reflects a child whose identity is caught between immediate extremes and who remains the victim of oscillating conflictual tension. It is therefore not surprising to find a sensory awareness and perhaps a preconscious desire for annulment and death:

Nell'età di cinque anni in circa, dal mal de' pondi fui ridotto in fine; e mi pare di aver nella mente tuttavia un certo barlume de' miei patimenti, e che senza aver nessuna di quello che fosse la morte, pure la desiderava come fine di dolore (p. 10).

In light of this statement one may say that the motif of death is central to Alfieri's character development and consequently remains a central point of interest in his tragedies. Just as his *Antigone* hurries unflinchingly towards her death, so too did the young Alfieri experience an impulse, albeit unconscious, to alleviate his restlessness by eating a certain plant which was supposedly poisonous:

io avea sentito dire non so da chi, nè come, nè quando, che v'era un'erba detta cicuta che avvelenava e faceva morire, io non avea mai fatto pensiero di voler morire, e poco sapea quel che il morire si fosse: eppure seguendo così un non so quale istinto naturale misto d'un dolore di cui m'era ignota la fonte, mi spinsi avidissimamente a mangiar di quell'erba (p. 13).

The source of Alfieri's death wish, which he claims was of unknown origin ("ignota la fonte"), was first expressed in eating the plant and obviously originated from earlier events.

In the case of Alfieri, the impulse was manifested as a mechanism of displaced hostility, originally referring to other objects, the parental figures. The object choice of a boy in a familial environment is of an incestuous nature, which is necessarily imbued with Oedipal triangles. The son's incestuous choice of his mother as a love object brings with it the fear of his father's jealous anger, and potential to castrate him.² Thus the Oedipal triangle awakens with the narcissistic premise of castration anxiety. If one reviews the first years of Alfieri's life, prior to his youthful attempted suicide, one discovers that his father died when he was a year old and that his mother remarried shortly thereafter. Alfieri felt a strong attachment to his mother and later transferred this attachment to his sister. But although he speaks of love for his mother and sister, if and how much they reciprocated this love remains questionable. So one may suggest that Alfieri suffered from unrequited love. The absence of this parental love in the social microcosm of the family resulted in Alfieri's further alienation from social interaction. The lack of a steady figure or figures with whom Alfieri the child can identify creates a condition wherein Alfieri is unable to invest his own self-love into the beloved others. This is one of the first steps in the formation of a separate and healthy identity. In Alfieri the result of such a situation seems to be a negative form of narcissism: "In età di nove anni e mezzo io mi ritrovai dunque ad un tratto trapiantato in mezzo a persone sconosciute, allontanato affatto dai parenti, isolato, ed abbandonato per così dire a me stesso" (p. 25). The pathology inherent in this form of narcissism finds its manifestations in his ambivalent relationship towards his self. Throughout the first half of Alfieri's *Vita* a constant reference is made to his changing moods. Not until Alfieri begins to write his works does a veritable shift occur from the immediacy of his felt sentiments to a symbolic appropriation of his world. What ensues in his work, however, is a reconstruction of his ego according to idiosyncratic premises which ultimately denounce all that is other (any identification with objects outside of his self which may represent social order, consequently a tyranny) as

morally and unconditionally destructive to the emancipation of his existence:

Un animo risoluto, ostinatissimo, ed indomito; un cuore ripieno ridondante di affetti di ogni specie tra' quali predominavano con bizzarra mistura l'amore e tutte le sue furie, ed una profonda ferocissima rabbia ed abborrimento contra ogni *qualsivoglia* tirannide (p. 151).

The narcissistic element in such a statement becomes manifest in Alfieri through a deflected self image. The mixture of love and rage has its sources in feelings of castration which form a negative appropriation of one self vis a vis the world. One may suggest that such a narcissistic element may be the consequence of Alfieri's inability to detach himself from his desire for his mother, his primary love object. The father intervenes in the Oedipal triangle and frustrates the son in his desires.³ The frustration caused by this intervention creates a mixture of unresolved conflicts. Alfieri, unable to identify with the sociological and psychological aspects of the role of the father is left without a viable social context.

To paraphrase Lacan, one may suggest that for Alfieri the "imago" of the body, fragmented by castration, is a result of the father's symbolic intervention and becomes a catalyst for the child's aggression turned inward and linked with the death wish:

In due o tre aspetti me occorre di rimirare ben in faccia la morte nella mia gioventú; e mi pare di averla ricevuta sempre con lo stesso contegno. Chi sa poi, se quando ella mi si riaffacerà irremissibile io nello stesso modo la riceverò. Bisogna veramente che l'uomo muoia, perché altri possa appurare, ed io stesso, il di lui giusto valore (p. 139).

Although there is no indication of hostility in Alfieri's *Vita* towards his stepfather, we need only look at his tragedies to understand that the object of his intense hatred is directed towards authority, the universal symbol of the father. Alfieri's persistent affirmation of his affection towards his stepfather as well as towards his mother is conscientiously maintained, but aside from these predominant discursive tendencies there may be found to exist a contrary and unconscious hostility indicating the ambivalence of strong human emotions. One may say that Alfieri's extreme hatred for anything French, may be a form of dis-

guised hostility for his mother⁴: “Il mio padre chiamavasi Antonio Alfieri, la madre, Monica Maillard de Tournon. Era questa di origine Savoiarda come i barbari di lei cognomi dimostrano” (p. 7). It should be remembered that Alfieri’s dream was to see Italy unified, with the exclusion of Savoy, his mother’s native province. Such hostile projections may serve to settle emotional conflicts which lie at the basis of neurosis.

I would like to suggest that Alfieri’s unconscious desire to eat the plant in order to rid himself of pain, “come fine di dolore” is the reflection of an unconscious violation of a moral code. Incest and patricide are too extreme to bear and result in the need for the expiation of Oedipal guilt. Since Alfieri is unable to express his intense emotional attachment towards his mother, he displaces this love to his sister. When she is sent away to school and he is deprived of his only acceptable object, the structure of his past desire begins to reveal itself to him. He wishes to die. The sister’s departure is like the father’s intervention because it takes the object of desire away from him. Alfieri’s preoccupation with death and his intense melancholy may consequently be seen as displaced hostility toward the father. The manifestation of aggressivity through the death wish is intensely narcissistic in structure. The very presence of the father, later repeated in the absence of the sister, denies the subject Alfieri the gratification of his primitive needs and suspends him in a state of inertia (hence his persistent moodiness and inability to free himself from the essence of his feelings). In this way, the damming up of psychic energy is eventually transformed into the protection and healing of the subject from the imagined aggressivity assailing him from the Other.

Another important aspect of Alfieri’s life which needs examination is his relationship to his older half-brother in which one finds many similarities to the father-son struggle. Alfieri openly admits his envy towards his half-brother, while at the same time he is careful to state clearly that he felt no hatred towards him. Such insistent denial of hatred towards the person who had received the major part of his mother’s attention may, by its vehemence, indicate its opposite and thereby give us another source for understanding the hatred which later found expression in his texts.

In describing his older half-brother Alfieri says: "Ma egli era tanto più grande di me, avea più libertà di me, più denari, più carezze dai genitori" (p. 19). It is noteworthy that once while playing with his brother, he was injured and received a severe wound from which he soon recovered. He began to associate a certain idea of glory to this wound, an idea which was to inspire him to attain in later years the position of *poeta vate*:

Quella fasciatura dunque non mi faceva nessuna ripugnanza a mostrarla in pubblico: o fosse, perché l'idea di un pericolo corso mi lusingasse, o che, per un misto d'idee ancora informi nel mio capicino, io annettessi pure una qualche idea di gloria a quella ferita (p. 20).

Alfieri proceeds to tell us that one year after the wounding incident his half-brother died. This incident, presented chronologically in the text, contributes directly to enforce Alfieri's sense of omnipotence.

Given that his older half-brother received the attention of the family which to Alfieri unconsciously represents identity and significance, "member of society", a certain amount of idealization for this older half-brother is a necessary defense mechanism against infantile rage and envy. Alfieri's older brother represents all that he desires, but cannot be. The wounding incident becomes a means by which Alfieri can free himself from this envy. The older brother, no longer a perfect example of omnipotence, has revealed a lack, a defect through which Alfieri can escape from the bondage of envy.⁵ Alfieri's wound, from which he recovers, becomes the symbol of his own badge of courage, so that when his brother dies a year later, the death of this fraternal rival reinforces Alfieri's sense of glory. Alfieri transfers the original projected omnipotence of his brother onto himself. This symbolic process, however, has been carried out, not through selective differentiation of self to vital Other, but rather through the mediation of death. Hence death becomes more and more a central motif in Alfieri's life as his sense of omnipotence is coupled with an aggrandized love of death.⁶

The ruthless aspect of this confining structure, deeply repressed within the child's unconscious proved to be tragic for his later social development and his tragedies may be read as deriving from this trap by a kind of re-writing of its very structure. In the textual versions of this structure, the hero of a tragedy must suffer and, unlike the sub-

ject in real life, consciously take upon himself the consequence of guilt. Such an unabashedly Freudian interpretation of the relationship of Alfieri's childhood and his later artistic work, is a concept not entirely foreign to Alfieri's own view of things as we can see from his *Vita* when he says: "Questo primo squarcio di una vita (che tutta forse è inutilissima di sapersi) riuscirà certamente inutilissima per tutti coloro, che stimandosi uomini si vanno scordando che l'uomo è una continuazione del bambino" (p. 23).

As an extremely sensitive young man, with an extraordinary passion for love and hatred, a passion too frightening to confront, Alfieri not surprisingly internalizes his aggressivity and is left with feelings of desolation and with a desire for death. This uncontrollable passionate nature victimized him for years. And if one recalls, how Alfieri was sent from tears to laughter on the plains of Aragon, by his inability to verbalize his emotions, to make them language, one might say, in Lacanian terms, that Alfieri was tormented within the realm of the imaginary. He sought and desired to enter the symbolic, that is the world of language and textuality. As long as Alfieri remains fixed at the level of emotional representation, fixed in the immediacy of his expressed emotions, he is living within the imaginary. He is living within states of being, here various emotions, in which an actualized self is thwarted by the intensity of the lived phenomena. In order for Alfieri to transfer these essential states into form requires the appropriation of these states via a symbolic order. The necessary precondition for the emancipation of a self, is achieved by divorcing the self from its own phenomenological content. In so doing the self consequently forms itself as its own matter. For Alfieri, the content of his essential strivings finds formed expression through the medium of language. In Lacanian terms it is the acquisition into the symbolic order, here language, which transforms essence into intelligible expression. In other words, Alfieri's affective expressions in Aragon, represent his desire to transfer these unconscious impulses into a symbolic form which is the adjustment of the Oedipal conflict. Thus the work becomes the realm of the father and is the medium through which one normalizes aggressive instincts.

It was not until Alfieri began his arduous task of composing his tragedies that he was finally able to free himself from the torment of those confusing passions, so that at least the catharsis he experienced

through writing gave him some mastery over the violence of his emotions. The *Vita* is a testament of his struggle to find verbal expression. Thus, in entering into this newly acquired symbolic form, he has moved away from the imaginary and achieved through sublimation, expression within a highly poetic verbal form and through a motivated act.

As Lacan has argued, the acquisition of the symbolic relieves the subject from undifferentiated subjective fluctuations. Conflict is no longer internalized but for Alfieri becomes externalized through his work in a rivalry with all that is Other and potentially threatening to the individual's position in the world.

The play *Antigone* unites all the elements which mirror Alfieri's own soul. Hatred, guilt, and death are the motifs of Alfieri's personal life and are the central themes of his *Antigone*. For in *Antigone*, one finds the fatal curse upon the house of Laius for which Antigone must, and for which she and she alone must atone. The principal conflict is between her and Creon, the supreme symbol of universal tyranny. Antigone, as well as many of Alfieri's other tragic figures, becomes a symbol of his uncontested hatred towards the father as symbolized by all forms of law.

The necessity for emancipation, in order to sever the chains of servitude from a man such as Creon, can ultimately be found through death. Antigone, on the one level, is the heroine of liberty, as guaranteed by law, but on the other level, becomes the heroine of absolute lawless freedom, a freedom granted only to those who are above all standard moral considerations. Antigone's incestuous heredity forbids her to involve herself with her own potential earthy passions. Her eyes are fixed only on death, since death is the only illusion, her only escape from heredity. At this point one should remember Alfieri's own need to find liberation, when still a child, through death. Tortured by an un verbalized desire for his mother and sister, a result perhaps of the first instinctual desires of an infant, Alfieri is motivated to create both the play and the character, and ultimately, through these, he is redeemed. For it is in the character of Antigone that Alfieri has created a kindred mentality capable of understanding the powerful and painful journey of his soul. Antigone's very incestuous heritage is the textual expression of Alfieri's hidden Oedipus, and gives her a franchise to feel

pity not available to Alfieri's own consciousness. As Haemon says: "Il padre cieco, da tutti disertò, in chi trovò, se non in lei, pietade?"⁷

Pity for a being blind to his own fate, assuages the guilt of unconscious Oedipal desires. And this guilt is the burden which all of Alfieri's heroes must bear. Their inherited guilt, because it is inherited, leaves them in some way not responsible. Death provides the only escape from this enigma. Antigone desires to have her innocence recognized by others and for this reason she never flinches from death. For even after Antigone knows of her brother's cremation, she nevertheless pursues her fate, which is the climax of all her suffering:

O cielo!
 Cener del mio fratello, amato pegno,
 Prezioso e funesto . . . ah! tu sei desso.
 Quell'urna sacra alle mie labbra accorta.
 Delle calde mie lagrime bagnarti
 Concesso m'è, pria di morire! . . .⁸

Expiation of guilt through death symbolizes the moment of glory and the principle which motivates Antigone towards this self-justification is hatred. She feels hatred for the man who denied her brother proper burial rites and for the man responsible for the extermination of her family. Creon and Antigone are at war, motivated by their mutual hatred, both determined to maintain their positions. In recalling Alfieri's own existential need to maintain a rigid and aggressive persona in relation to the external world, one perceives the *Urtext* for the opposition of Antigone and Creon's law. They each desire to maintain a dogmatic position beyond the achievement of Antigone's own resolution to die. However, the final act culminates in a test appropriate to each and to the situations which they willfully create. The unbending Creon is left powerless and without issue, a bitter end for a tyrannical ruler. His only son Haemon, whom he loved yet misunderstood, and most importantly, thought he could control, kills himself.

Creon's inability to give up his position of authority, or to bend it to his son's request, and his constant need to manipulate and control the destinies of others, serve as the principal catalysts of this tragic affair. For if he were truly magnanimous, he would allow the feelings of

human affection to color at times his position as embodiment of the law. Creon can love only his son. This love remains still another expression of Creon's authority. These individuals exist as isolated constituents, locked within a narcissistic structure of individual absolutism characterized by their enslavement to their particular form of inflexible heroism.

The throne represents the crystallization of the family structure. Creon sits upon it in a truly patriarchal fashion. The crowned head on the throne represents the rule of the father, the one most feared by young boys who are possessed by castration anxiety. This is the king's strength. He governs with fear and power over the bodies of his subjects. The son's fear of castration finds a response in the father's fear of being supplanted by a potentially rebellious son. This potential rebellion is the subject's desire to replace the father's symbol of the phallus with himself, thus becoming the phallus to the mother. The father figure becomes internalized as a strong superego in young men who have successfully worked through the Oedipal structure.

One must remember that Alfieri's tragedy evolves on a symbolic plane and reveals archetypes. These archetypes are the manifestation of Alfieri's desires. He strives for an ideal and, in doing so, he, as well as his heroes, stand apart. Antigone, Haemon, Creon, but not Argia who is tied to familial duties, remain separated throughout the play. Each plays out his own destiny to its final resolution, thereby echoing Alfieri himself who remained an isolated individual his entire life, allowing only a select few to enter his domain.

There is much to be said about this self-imposed isolation of both Alfieri and his characters. One could begin by noting the intense desire of each for a glory available to them only by their absolute refusal to obey any law. Alfieri's Antigone we may remember is unique among Antigones in that she is self-legislating, never bowing to the law of the Other. Alfieri, through a creative textual act, has produced something similar to the gratification of his wish to replace the father. That which Alfieri could not accomplish in the real world, the successful resolution of the Oedipal structure, he tries to achieve on the symbolic plane of his writing. What began for Alfieri as an unknown hostility, was projected from his inner life onto the outer world, consequently enabling

him to detach himself from his inner conflicts and eventually producing his tragedies. For Alfieri, this internal struggle almost always consisted of a rebellion against a divine or human authority, whichever provided the most convenient stand-in for his father.

This liberty which Alfieri so vehemently desires, in the last analysis, is a libertarian concept which extends itself into the realms of anarchism. For Alfieri, his vision alone is beautiful and virtue must not fall short of his desires. He rebels against life as it is, but offers no proposal for change. So too, the action of his Antigone remains anti-social, by taking the form of death the final tragic liberation never escapes definition by hatred, as a kind of murder by death. The individualism of both Antigone and Alfieri is full of aggression which cannot find completion in any external value. Paradoxically the affirmation of the self then becomes the negation of the self. Self-sacrifice is not for the sake of the Other, but a sacrifice of self on behalf of the self. Any notion towards the Other is sacrificed for the reflection in the mirror. The inability to fashion oneself and to adjust one's position in the world according to normative values and ideals results in Alfieri in alienation and is often characterized by an anarchistic temperament. For anarchism is a private enterprise, a non-historical attitude which denies past, present, and future. Neither Alfieri nor his Antigone have the emotional capacity to transcend their self-love for the love of universal social ideals. This self-love is a narcissistic condition in which the subject can only recognize its own *Weltanschauung*, an externalized persona of itself. Anything or anyone outside of this closed network is potentially threatening to the realization of the subject's volition.

The source of this ideology is not self-affirmation which would occur in rapport with the Other. It is instead a defense against the subject's own aggressive impulses. What appears in *Della Tirranide* to be a socially conscious attempt to constructively attack such institutions as the state, church and family, can be seen in the light of the narcissistic self-affirmation we have just described, the self-affirmation evident in his tragedies to be more anarchy than socio-political consciousness. For Alfieri and Antigone must stand alone, beyond the banality of institutions and assert their superiority by denying social reality.

Notes:

1. Vittorio Alfieri, *Vita* (Milano: Aldo Garzanti editore, 1977), p. 14. All further references appear in the text.

2. Sigmund Freud, "Anxiety and Instinctual Life", *The Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, translated and edited by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), pp. 550–551.

3. "In the son's eyes his father embodies every unwilling tolerated social restraint; his father prevents him from exercising his will, from early sexual pleasure and, where there is common property in the family, from enjoying it." Sigmund Freud, "Archaic and Infantile Features," *The Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* translated and edited by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), p. 206.

4. One may suggest that the veiled hostility Alfieri feels towards his mother may be the result of feeling betrayed by her. The child desires the mother in so far as he is also the object of his mother's desire. The father intervenes in two ways: "he deprives the child of the object of its desire and he deprives the mother of the phallic object." The mother who is subject to the father's law may withdraw her original affection towards the child. If the child doesn't recognize the father or accept the father as law then the child's resolution to the Oedipal problem is negative. On another level, however, the exclusion of the territory of Savoia from the unification of Italy may point to an attempt to accede to the symbolic. "It promotes him in his realization of self through participation in the world of culture, language and civilization." Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* (London, Manley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 82–82.

For further explanation on the fear of loss of a mother's affection and its consequences see: Sigmund Freud, "Anxiety and Instinctual Life," *The Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* translated and edited by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), p. 551.

5. "And the two moments, when the subject denies himself and when he charges the other becomes confused, and one discovers in him that paranoid structure of the ego that finds its analogue in the fundamental negations described by Freud as the three delusions of jealousy, erotomania, and interpretation. It is the special delusion of the misanthropic "belle âme", throwing back on to the world the disorder of which his being is composed." Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc. 1977), p. 20.

6. "Obliged to fashion himself with reference to and in rivalry with the other; obliged to wait for recognition from a judgement by the other, man is naturally inclined to a whole range of aggressive behavior, from envy, morbid jealousy and real aggression to mortal negation of self or other." Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* (London, Manley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 181.

7. Vittorio Alfieri, *Antigone* (Brescia: la scuola editrice, 1963), p. 88, Act III, scene i.

8. Alfieri, *Antigone*, p. 126, Act V, scene ii.