Theorizing a republican poetics: P. B. Shelley and Alfieri

Michael Rossington
School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics, Newcastle University, UK
Email: michael.rossington@ncl.ac.uk

In *A Defence of Poetry*, written in Tuscany in early 1821, Shelley considered the role of poetry in effecting freedom at a time when monarchies in Europe were in crisis. This essay speculates that his Italian situation speaks to *Della tirannide, Del principe e delle lettere* and *Vita*, amongst the most esteemed of Alfieri’s works. An outline is offered first of Shelley’s recorded engagement with Alfieri’s writings, including their distinct conceptions of tragedy, then of the treatment of Alfieri in reviews between 1800 and 1825. Consideration is also given to representations of Alfieri by Foscolo, Byron and Staël. The latter are not unsympathetic towards Alfieri’s view that the artist’s principal function is as a patriot since it is a fitting response to the impossible political situation of Italy. Like Alfieri’s prose, Shelley’s *Defence* and *A Philosophical View of Reform* align poetry against monarchy and set the writer apart from the state. His interests therefore correspond with the cosmopolitan, transnational reach of Alfieri’s writings not only the uses made of them for nationalist ends by others. Finally, it is noticed that Shelley discovered in Italy what Alfieri found in England, a critical vantage-point that enabled the expression of cosmopolitan republican values.

Percy Shelley invested heavily in liberty in the Italian peninsula, especially between July 1820 and March 1821, for reasons that have as much to do with his poetics as his politics. Residence in Tuscany in this period reinforced his awareness of authors associated with
Florence, particularly Dante, Machiavelli and Alfieri, whose reflections on Italy in their times had included speculation on its future, and the conditions required to end its enslavement. The six weeks or so in which he drafted *A Defence of Poetry*, beginning in early February 1821, coincided with the crisis borne of the recent revolutions in Southern Europe coming to a head, the reassertion of Austrian hegemony ultimately confirmed by the defeat of the Neapolitan constitutionalists at Rieti in March.

The state of political limbo in Italy in the early months of 1821 may thus be more than a circumstantial backdrop to the assertion at the end of *A Defence* that, “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.” (*Major Works* 701) This claim, that the impact of poetry transcends nation and is cosmopolitan, strikes a different note from the historical method deployed elsewhere in the essay to understand the literature of Shelley’s own age. Earlier he had remarked that the basis for believing contemporary England to be on the verge of political change was the correspondence between its current state and the intellectual ferment of the seventeenth century: “we live among such philosophers and poets as surpass beyond comparison any who have appeared since the last national struggle for civil and religious liberty.” (*Major Works* 700) Underlying this argumentative shift from the English nation to the world at the close of *A Defence* is the view that poetry and liberty are linked indissolubly. Whatever its local or temporal manifestations, poetry’s capacity to bring about freedom is universal and eternal. As has been noted, this portion of *A Defence* recalls closely the penultimate paragraph of the introduction to *A Philosophical View of Reform* which Shelley had begun in late 1819 in response to the unstable condition of England. But in *A Philosophical View* the idea that political progress inheres in poetry, broadly understood, is articulated in an even more strikingly declamatory manner: “whatever systems they [poets and philosophers] may professedly support, they actually advance the interests of Liberty.” (*Major Works* 646) In August 1820, between the composition of these two prose works,
Prometheus Unbound ... with Other Poems was published. It contained poetry, most obviously “Ode to Liberty”, that alludes to recent and historically remote political events yet resists an exclusively national frame of reference. The title of one of the volume’s poems, “An Ode, Written, October, 1819, before the Spaniards Had Recovered Their Liberty”, exemplifies this refusal of geopolitical confinement. The poem’s stanzas refer to the massacre at St Peter’s Field in August 1819, but the month of composition announced in its title is an approximate mid-point between the grievous events in Manchester and the triumph of the constitutionalist revolution in Spain that had begun in January 1820. With hindsight “Peterloo” is thereby sublimated within a grander, overarching narrative of unfolding freedom. From his Italian vantage-point, then, Shelley in these works relishes not only what he wishes to believe is a Europe-wide tendency towards political liberty, but also an opportunity to show that poetry and philosophy, including his own, may be seen, retrospectively and prospectively, to effect it.

As I have suggested elsewhere, Shelley’s efforts to publish verse and prose with the aim of influencing opinion in England and Italy in 1820-21 testify to a preoccupation with such agency at this time. “Ode to Naples” appeared in English newspapers in September and October 1820; his unpublished account, in Italian, of Tommaso Sgricci’s improvisation La Morte d’Ettore, probably composed in late January 1821, appears to have been intended for an Italian review; his likewise unpublished Italian self-translation of “Ode to Liberty”, “Ode alla Libertà”, neatly copied as if for the press, possibly dates from the same month and a similar destination may be inferred; and “Sonnet: Political Greatness”, prompted by events in Naples, was sent to England for publication in February 1821, although remained unpublished until 1824. In what follows, I propose that Shelley’s writing in 1820-1821 about monarchy and the poet’s function may be usefully considered alongside Vittorio Alfieri’s Della tirannide, Del principe e delle lettere and his autobiography Vita di Vittorio Alfieri.
scritta da esso, as well as debates about Alfieri’s legacy and his mostly anglophile and francophobic attitudes in the criticism of A. W. Schlegel and Sismondi, the reviews of Jeffrey and Southey, the literature of Foscolo, Byron and Staël. *Della tirannide* and *Del principe e delle lettere* are not offered as direct sources of Shelley’s thinking. (There is no record of him having read them, although it seems unlikely that he had not.) Rather Shelley’s views of monarchy and the writer’s relationship to the state is seen as intersecting with and diverging from Alfieri’s in ways that are comparatively illuminating.

I

Before surveying the British and continental reception of Alfieri’s writings in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, a sketch of Shelley’s engagement with them is in order. Given Alfieri’s status and Shelley’s precocity, it seems very likely that he would have encountered his work in his youth. It is further conceivable that Alfieri was discussed at Harriet Boinville’s house at Bracknell where he first stayed in July 1813, studying Italian with her daughter Cornelia Turner (*Letters* 1: 384). But there is firm evidence that the then Mary Godwin, almost certainly prompted by Shelley, read the 1810 English translation of *Vita*, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Victor Alfieri, written by Himself* in October 1814, and that in September 1815 Shelley ordered *Quindici tragedie* from his bookseller (*Journals* 37; *Letters* 1: 433).

The most intense period of recorded interest in Alfieri occurs in September and early October 1818, at Este, when Mary Shelley read in Italian a “great many of the plays”, as well as *Vita*. She had by then been enjoined by Shelley to translate Alfieri’s *Mirra* (1784-1786), a task possibly prompted in part by Robert Southey’s extensive treatment of it in a review of Charles Lloyd’s translation of the tragedies (*Journals* 226, 229; *Letters* 2: 39, 40; Southey
Alfieri’s relatively recent dramatization of this tale from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* of the passion for her father of “Myrrha who was much more unfortunate than culpable” (“piú assai infelice che non colpevole Mirra”), forms an oblique pretext for the treatment of father-daughter incest in *The Cenci* and *Matilda*, as has often been noted (*Memoirs* 238; *Vita* 228; Ep. 4, ch. 14). The *Mirra* translation may not only have been an exercise for Mary Shelley to consolidate her knowledge of Italian but part of a joint project whose origins perhaps lay in the Shelleys’ first meetings with the Gisbornes in May 1818 when she transcribed John Gisborne’s manuscript in Italian of the Cenci family story (*Journals* 211). In May 1820, two months after *The Cenci* appeared, it is unsurprising that Shelley should have defended his rendition of the story by invoking Alfieri amongst other tragedians: “people reprobate the subject of my tragedy—let them abase Sophocles, Massinger, Voltaire & Alfieri in the same sentence, & I am content.” (*Letters* ii 200) Of more interest is the contrast between his and Alfieri’s accounts of how they dramatized their subjects. Of *Mirra*, Alfieri comments that he saw “it was necessary to display, by action alone, what is related in Ovid” (“ch’ella dovesse nella mia tragedia operare quelle cose stesse, ch’ella in Ovidio descrive”), whereas Shelley states that the dramatist of the Cenci story “must increase the ideal, and diminish the actual horror of the events” (*Memoirs* 238; *Vita* 228; Ep. 4, ch. 14; *Major Works* 316). Addressing a similar difficulty, the starkness that is the hallmark of Alfieri’s tragic method contrasts here with Shelley’s more elaborate ambition for drama to teach “the human heart ... the knowledge of itself” (*Major Works* 316).

A full account of Shelley’s attitude towards Alfieri’s tragedies must register a further, explicitly critical dimension. In a letter of September 1821 to Horace Smith, Shelley contrasts his conception of drama with Byron’s:
He is occupied in forming a new drama, and, with views which I doubt not will expand as he proceeds, is determined to write a series of plays, in which he will follow the French tragedians and Alfieri, rather than those of England and Spain, and produce something new, at least, to England. This seems to me the wrong road; but genius like his is destined to lead and not to follow. (*Letters* 2: 349)

Shelley’s intimation here is instructive: his models are Shakespeare and Calderón, Byron’s Voltaire and Alfieri. Alfieri’s conception of tragedy had been “the wrong road” for others too. August Wilhelm Schlegel averred that “the principles of tragic art which Alfieri followed are altogether false.” (1: 228) Likewise the heroine of Staël’s *Corinne*, though sympathetic to his dilemma, finds Alfieri’s art to be compromised: “‘He was born to act, but he could only write. His style and his tragedies are affected by this constraint. He wanted to achieve a political objective by means of literature. This objective was, no doubt, the noblest of all, but that is irrelevant; nothing mars works of the imagination more than to have an objective.’” (118) The differences between Alfieri and Shelley may be seen in their responses to the question of whether Charles I was a suitable subject for tragic representation. In the summer of 1818 Shelley had “incited” Mary Shelley to write a tragedy about the Stuart king, a project he had taken over by July 1820, but which remained unfinished at his death (*Novels* 2: 282; *Letters* 2: 40, 219-220). It is tempting to think that a spur to Shelley’s conception of this task lay in Alfieri’s resistance to it. In *Vita* Alfieri remembers his abandonment of the prose outline for *Carlo Primo* (1777) — *Charles Premier* — in chilling terms: “about the middle of the third act my heart and my hand became so benumbed that I found it impossible to continue” (“a mezzo il terz’atto mi si agghiacciò sì fattamente il cuore e il mano, che non fu possibile alla penna il proseguirlo.”) (*Memoirs* 178; *Vita* 171; Ep. 4, ch. 4) The Dedication mockingly addressed “To the Most Sacred Majesty of Charles the First” that is prefaced to
Agide (1784-1786), a play Mary Shelley read at Este (Journals 229), provides a rationale for this freezing of Alfieri’s creative powers: “one can in no way make a tragedy of your tragical death, the cause of it not being sublime.” (Tragedies 1: xvii) Charles’s absolutist “designs, common to the herd of monarchs” preclude the glory of tragic representation that Alfieri accords to the king of Sparta:

Agis, by re-establishing equality and liberty, wished to restore to Sparta her virtue and her splendour hence he died full of glory, leaving behind him everlasting fame. You, by attempting to violate all limits to your authority, falsely wished to procure your own private good: hence nothing remains of you; and the ineffectual compassion of others alone accompanies you to the tomb. (Tragedies 1: xviii)

Shelley’s intention for his “Historical Tragedy of ‘Charles the First’”, that it should be written “in the spirit of human nature, without prejudice or passion”, appears to refute the basis of Alfieri’s principled objection to an aesthetic treatment of this subject (Letters 2: 372, 220). Expressed in this way, Shelley’s project sounds Shakespearian. However, notwithstanding his differences from Alfieri concerning the scope of tragedy, his writings, and Byron’s admiration for them, were a reminder to Shelley that the condition of Italy challenged the very basis of literary protocols.

II

In the two decades after his death in 1803 assessments of Alfieri’s life and writings featured prominently in British and continental reviews, novels, poems, and travel narratives about the contemporary condition of Italy. The critical consensus was that his œuvre was uneven, and
the restless and alienated authorial persona it projected unsympathetic, if compelling. But what were perceived to be his most significant achievements, “[t]he creation of a new Italian drama”, as Sismondi put it (2: 529), and, in the satirical poetry of *Il misogallo* (1799), a discourse for resisting French dominion, spoke directly to writers and readers in Napoleonic and Restoration Europe. For them, the antagonism between literature and institutional power was inescapable (in terms, for example, of the way in which the authorities suppressed publications deemed to be seditious or blasphemous). Alfieri’s writings conduct a war with tyranny, whether it takes the form of an absolute monarchy, a republican revolutionary government or a dictatorship, and they serve as an inspiration for the major European writers of the age, Staël and Byron. Nora Crook and Tilar Mazzeo have valuably pointed to support for the *Risorgimento* in Mary Shelley’s later writings, particularly her life of Alfieri in *Italian Lives* (1835). But in the first quarter of the nineteenth century his legacy is not confined to the national question in Italy. He is also central to a debate in European letters about how a poet and dramatist is to fulfil universal libertarian objectives.

Several Alfieris may be discerned in early nineteenth-century writing and all could be described as republican. One is the reactionary who, in the words of Foscolo’s “Essay on the Present Literature of Italy” (1818) expressed “his detestation of the French revolution, as having ruined the cause of liberty; that cause to which Alfieri had dedicated all his talents, and the better portion of his fortune and his life.” (408) Such an Alfieri was championed by Southey who, in a *Quarterly Review* article published within months of the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, referred to the moment in *Vita* when, in 1778, permission for him to leave his birthplace Piedmont was granted by its king, to the satisfaction of each: “we were both well pleased, he to lose such a subject, and I to acquire my liberty” (“ed ambedue fummo contentissimi: egli di perdermi, io di ritrovarmi.”) (*Memoirs* 188; *Vita* 182; Ep. 4, ch. 6) Southey’s spin on this episode makes the protagonist of *Vita* sound far more docile and
accommodating than most readers find to be the case: “Alfieri was not a seditious subject, but he abhorred oppression ... the King ... was as well pleased to get rid of such a subject, as Alfieri was to become a citizen of the world.” (Southey 351) But there was a logic to this deployment of Alfieri in a political discourse that in Southey’s case had warred with Napoleon’s invasion of Spain under the banner of ‘patriotism’ which signified both British anti-French sentiments and the work of anyone “who worked for the cause of freedom against despotism.” (Lyttelton 63) There is even a suggestion in the Dedicatory sonnet to Southey prefaced to Lloyd’s translation of The Tragedies that this patriotic cause originates in Italy. Lloyd’s poem expresses hope that his recipient may judge, “That the plant bears in this its foreign shoot, / Withdrawn from Italy’s more fervent beam, / In Britain, undeteriorated fruit.” (ll. 12-14) But this reactionary Alfieri was a disappointment to others, including Francis Jeffrey. Keith Crook notes how the Edinburgh Review, referring to Joseph Forsyth’s mild inquiry in his Remarks ... during an excursion in Italy (1813) as to whether the mocking Dedication to Agide (cited above) was either ‘manly’ or ‘humane’, accused him of “whin[ing] in favour of the Stuarts.” (Forsyth xxiv, 38). In his review of Memoirs, Jeffrey had described his essay Della tirannide approvingly as “perhaps the most nervous and eloquent of all his prose compositions”(Jeffrey 288). Alfieri’s praise of the British constitution in Della tirannide, which leads him at one point to refer to it as “the English republic” (“la repubblica inglese”), no doubt appealed to Jeffrey’s Whig sympathies. (Of Tyranny 58; Della tirannide 61) Given the earlier, revolutionary Alfieri, Jeffrey taunts the later one for his patrician antipathy towards the French revolutionary government: “He did not admire Kings indeed,—because he did not happen to be born one, and because they were the only beings to which he was born inferior.” (295) Within the reviews of the 1810s Alfieri’s writings are thus used both as a stick to beat the French Revolution and its aftermath, and as a reminder that
England’s constitution of 1688 could be interpreted as a “republican” model for fending off monarchical absolutism.

Alfieri assumes a pure, almost mythical status in novels and poetry of this period where he is often memorialized by association with Machiavelli. In Foscolo’s *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (1802), the protagonist, invigorated in Florence by his visit to the memorials to Galileo, Machiavelli and Michelangelo in Santa Croce, writes that “[t]he only mortal whom I wanted to meet was Vittorio Alfieri, but I hear that he refuses to make fresh acquaintances, and I would not presume to ask him to break this resolution of his, which is probably the result of the times in which we live, his studies, and even more his passions and his experience of the world.” (85) *Dei sepolcri* (1807) enacts the same process of communion with the monuments in Santa Croce, but this time Alfieri (his remains now preserved there in a tomb sculpted by Canova) is himself depicted as remembering those Italians who have articulated liberty while not themselves being able to belong to a political state that may be identified as free:

And to these marbles
Vittorio often came for inspiration.

Angry with his own land, he wandered silent
Where Arno is deserted, looking longing
At fields and sky; and when he found no sight
Or living thing to mitigate his grief,
That stern man halted there, upon his face
Death-pallor manifest and also hope.
With these great men for ever, he inspires
Love of his native land. (ll. 188-197)
Foscolo’s novel and poem portray Alfieri as a tragically isolated figure. But the lines above, which prefigure Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” (including the circumstances of that poem’s composition in October 1819 “in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence”) also articulate a process of being inspired, and inspiring others. (Major Works 762) Thus Alfieri’s solitude and mortality (“Death-pallor”) are set against “hope” that his work will “for ever” yield the noblest form of love, patriotism. Staël’s Corinne, like Dei sepolcri, uses Alfieri not only as an anti-Napoleonic incitement, but as an example of the fuelling of an imaginative energy that resists being quelled and invites mobilization for political ends. Thus the heroine interrupts Oswald’s condemnation of the way that weak Italian governments have nevertheless managed to enslave minds with the remark that, “‘Other peoples have endured the yoke like us [...] but they lack the imagination which makes us dream of another fate.’”

(59) According to Corinne, notwithstanding institutional torpor there is hope because political servitude in Italy has always stimulated literary art. Stanzas 54 and 55 of Byron’s Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, Canto the Fourth (1818) add a further instalment to this deployment of Alfieri for dynamic national purposes. Byron’s poem reiterates the association made in Dei sepolcri between Alfieri and his predecessors through their commemoration in Santa Croce:

here repose

Angelo’s, Alfieri’s bones, and his,

The starry Galileo, with his woes;

Here Machiavelli’s earth, return’d to whence it rose. (ll. 483-486)

As in Dei sepolcri, these four are seen as inspiring “Spirits which soar from ruin”, permitting Italy to hope that its “decay/ Is still impregnate with divinity” (ll. 492-493).
The historian Harry Hearder makes the important point that the “national” Alfieri identifiable in the work of Foscolo, Staël and Byron manifested itself only late in his career:

Except for a brief attack on foreign mercenaries, in the tradition of Machiavelli, there is no trace in *Della tirannide* of Italian nationalism. Many years, later, however, Alfieri was to raise a first cry for “national freedom”. For him “nationality” had become a characteristic of importance [for] the future of a people, rather than for its past ... What gave a people a sense of “nationality” was not so much the geographical or material conditions they had experienced in common with the past, but the political programme—the dream of liberty—which they shared for the future. (161)

This assessment helps us to understand how Shelley’s transnational dream of liberty in *A Philosophical View* and *A Defence* yet capitalizes on the currency of Alfieri’s brand of Italian nationalism. The wide use of Alfieri’s future-oriented conception of Italy by early nineteenth-century writers resonates with Shelley’s formulation of the poet’s role in the cause of as yet unrealized liberty in his political Odes as well as his prose of 1819-1821. The subsequent venture of the journal *The Liberal* further demonstrates that for Byron, the Shelleys and Hunt, Italy constituted a kind of intellectual colony, the obvious setting to meditate critiques of civil and religious institutions across cultures and throughout history in essays, reviews, poems, dramas, short stories and translations (including, on Hunt’s part, renditions of Alfieri’s poems). As Alfieri showed in *Vita*, not being a native did not disqualify a writer from imagining alternatives to the present there because Italy was not yet a nation.
The introduction to the edition of *Quindici tragedie*, which Shelley ordered in 1815, is a reminder of Alfieri’s already controversial reputation in Britain soon after his death. The editor, Antonio Montucci, reproduces reviews of Alfieri from the *Monthly Magazine* of July 1804 and April 1805 but, in extensive footnotes, refutes vehemently many of the judgements expressed. These include the commonplace that Alfieri’s “ideas ... were rather directed to what ought to be, than what is” (1: xx), but also a doubt about the appropriateness of his choice of vocation: “I am inclined to believe, that his strong and penetrating genius, though adapted to various objects, had, nevertheless, a secret impulse, and a particular tendency which he mistook.” His real bent, it is argued, is not drama but the anatomizing of political power in prose: “This impulse [...] would, in my opinion, have directed him into the footsteps of Tacitus and Machiavel; and he appears to me to have been calculated to reproduce, under a new form, a compound of these two celebrated writers.” (1: xi) This observation is in line with one of the reasons Alfieri gives for expatriating himself from Piedmont, the pleasure he felt at reading these two writers and “the few other authors who like them think with energy and freedom” (“e i pochi altri simili sublimi e liberi autore”) (*Memoirs* 186; *Vita* 179; Ep. IV, ch. 6)

*Della tirannide* (1777-1787) was informed by Alfieri’s direct experience of travel on the continent and in England: “wherever I look in Europe I see in almost every region the faces of slaves ... every good man must believe, and hope, that inevitable change is not far off, whereby an almost universal liberty must supplant universal servitude.” (*Of Tyranny* 10-11). The essay evidently spoke to Italy’s position under Napoleonic rule, given the seven editions of the work that appeared there in the opening decade of the nineteenth century following its first publication at Turin in 1800 (xxxvi). As noted earlier, however, the
freedom which the essay advances is, to use Shelley’s word, “nationless” (*Prometheus Unbound* III iv 195). Alfieri’s later comment that “the work on tyranny ... should really have been written by an author who was a citizen of a free country” (“l’avere stess quel libro della *Tirannide* come se io fossi nato e domiciliato in paese di giusta e verace libertá”) acknowledges a contradiction between the circumstances of this essay’s composition in Piedmont and the argument of the later *Del principe e delle lettere*, that a writer may only flourish in a politically free state (*Memoirs* 186; *Vita* 179; Ep. 4, ch. 6). Mary Shelley judged that this treatise, while “a work of eloquence” was “rather a juvenile ebullition of feeling, than an argumentative essay.” (*Italian Lives* 277) Nevertheless the “ebullition of feeling” which amounts to indignation in the closing lines of the sonnet, “Protesta dell’autore”, that concludes Alfieri’s essay, may be seen as having some parallels with the driven language of the final two sections of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”:

Un Dio feroce, ignoto un Dio, da tergo
Me flagellava infìn da quei primi anni,
A cui maturo e impavido mi attergo.

Nè pace han mai, nè tregua, i caldi affanni
Del mio libero spirto, ov’io non vergo
Aspre carte in eccidio dei tiranni. (ll. 9-14)

(‘A fierce god, a god unknown, has been ever at my back, scourging me on since my earliest years, which now in maturity I contemplate fearlessly. And the fervent turmoil of my free spirit can never find peace unless I pen harsh pages for the destruction of tyrants.’) (*Of Tyranny* 101)
Del principe e delle lettere (1778-1795) elicited altogether higher praise from Mary Shelley:

Alfieri ... was an excellent prose writer: his treatise on “Princes and Literature” is full of power; the style is correct, flowing, yet simple, and without meretricious ornament. The pure spirit of independence burns like a holy lamp throughout, and gives a charm to every sentiment and expression. (288)

Alfieri’s treatise has been summarized by Franco Fido as “illustrat[ing] the antithetical nature and radical incompatibility of tyrant and writer: the former can survive only by destroying freedom, which is an indispensable condition for the activities of the latter.” (392) It argues that a writer is contaminated by a connection with a prince such that genuine creativity may only take place outside his state. In its conclusion, it pronounces that any prince who seeks to protect literature will obstruct it, and any writer who allows himself to be so protected is “a traitor to truth, to art, and to himself”. As well as arguing, like Shelley in A Defence, that “true letters can never flourish except in an atmosphere of liberty” (The Prince and Letters 159), Alfieri also enunciates a principle underpinning many of Shelley’s writings of 1819-1821, that writing itself is the means to the realization of liberty: “Until the day comes when citizens can confront the satellites of princes and destroy them, bold veracious writers must marshal themselves in force against princely ignorance to teach their timorous fellow-slaves to become men and citizens”. (159, 151)

In conclusion, a curious symmetry appears to emerge between the works by Shelley and Alfieri under discussion here. Shelley discovers in Tuscany something similar to what Alfieri found in England, namely a vantage-point that enabled the expression of cosmopolitan republican values. Shelley articulates his best-known theory of poetry in Tuscany, while
Alfieri professes to find the closest approximation to political liberty in England. In addition, each dwells on the integrity of writing and freedom. But any comparison between the pair must also account for Shelley’s significant disagreement with Alfieri’s theory of tragedy, and, furthermore, what John Lindon has identified as a “problem ... of strain within [Alfieri’s] political ideology, between the urge to idealize England for anti-revolutionary motives and an urge to make his late writings, including the Vita, an assertion of Italianità”. (91) It is these multiple and ever-shifting aspects of Alfieri’s legacy, his status as a revolutionary and an anti-revolutionary, as a national and a cosmopolitan intellectual, that makes his writing seem to resonate so intriguingly with Shelley’s artistic and political endeavours.

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References


