



Vittorio Alfieri (1749-1803)

## THE FOE OF TYRANTS:

*Italian poet Vittorio Alfieri's "L'America Libera" (1781; 1783)*

It is perhaps relatively few who *readily* associate Italy with the American Revolution, and yet a number of Italians, particularly men of arts and letters, became some of its ardent and prominent supporters. Four of the latter that conspicuously stand out in this regard are Filippo Mazzei (1730-1816), from Tuscany, physician, political historian, and agricultural innovator and colleague of Thomas Jefferson;<sup>1</sup> Lorenzo Da Ponte (1749-1838), of Venice, Mozart's librettist for "Marriage of Figaro," "Don Giovanni,"<sup>2</sup> and "Cosi Fan Tutte," who emigrated to America and found a welcome home there; Carlo Botta (1766-1837), from the Piedmont-Turin region, and who penned *Storia della guerra dell'Indipendenza d'America* ("History of the War of Independence of America," 1809) -- one of the Revolutionary War's most respected and frequently cited early histories; and poet and dramatist Vittorio Alfieri (1749-1803).

Alfieri, also from the Piedmont, was one of the most widely honored of Italian playwrights of his era, being much to the tragic stage what Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793), of Venice, was to comedy. Like Lord Byron, he was both a noble (in his case a Count) and a revolutionary. A friend of Beaumarchais, who of course acted a pivotal role in having military French aid sent to the rebelling American colonies, Alfieri was in many ways typical of the 18<sup>th</sup> century enlightened cosmopolitan and philosophically nation-less European, traveling as far as Sweden and Russia, as well as other parts of the continent, to share and sample other countries' ways of life and government -- and usually displeased with what he found when it came to the latter. And like a number of giants of the Age of Reason, he was emotionally quite temperamental. His was a soul literally aflame for freedom while simultaneously seething with incandescent hatred of despotism; whether legal or cultural. This was no little reflected in his tragedies in which, following philosopher Giambattista Vico, he presented tyranny as a result of the conflict between man's *selfish* nature and his inherent need to be a member of collective society; the most famous of these plays being his "Saul" (1782). Later in life, he became an enthusiastic proponent of the French Revolution only to become bitterly disillusioned by its missteps and excesses. As well, he no doubt viewed such as Napoleon as proof of his adopted thesis that the insatiable ambition of some is what ultimately leads men

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<sup>1</sup> Mazzei's enthusiasm and dedication on behalf of the American cause is no where better expressed than in his dispatches to Gov. Jefferson, written from Paris, March to May 1780; in which he (acting as a purchaser of munitions in France on behalf of the state of Virginia) at length and most meticulously describes the state of European political affairs in relation to Britain's then current war with her former colonies. See *Calendar of Virginia State Papers* (1875), vol. 1, edited by Wm. P. Palmer, pp. 339-352. Jefferson, who spoke and wrote the language fluently, probably felt a greater affinity for Italian culture and manners than that of any other European nation; and which admiration and sympathy we are regularly reminded of by the name and character of his famous hilltop home. France, however we should add, was also very close to Jefferson's heart and thoughts, and English traveler John Davis remarked that Jefferson's prose more resembled French than English.

<sup>2</sup> "Performed with great applause by the Old American Company at the Theatre in Southwark [Philadelphia]" in 1792. See Evans *American Bibliography* for that year.

into chains. He warmly embraced the American cause for Liberty, yet perhaps little realized that it too was not without its men, although also well-meaning, who used the event as vehicle for career advancement.<sup>3</sup>

In 1781 he wrote a series of four, and in 1783 a fifth, odes entitled *L'America Libera*; in which he serves up a doughty and ecstatic reverie of his thoughts and feelings on America's plight and struggle. The result is, in some respects and in hindsight, an occasionally puerile work, full of bombastic declamations and some exaggerated praising. Yet on the positive side, the fervor that animates Alfieri is indubitably soulful and sincere; and it is still possible to read these American Odes with some patriotic pleasure.<sup>4</sup>

As a poet is his own master -- as he must be if he is any serious composer of verse -- hope for freedom comes most fittingly from the words and voice of such as he. And if Alfieri's choices of arguments and allusions are not now always so compelling as originally intended, his lively and inextinguishable fire glows throughout and provides those already disposed to love liberty and to wish for the improved dignity of the human race continued hope.

Here then are some excerpts; as translated by Adolph Caso.<sup>5</sup>

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*First Ode* --  
Reasons for War

I.

Is this a warlike trumpet I hear,  
Coming from the immense ocean  
Whose waters have not yet been sailed?  
What streaking arrows are filling the sky?  
What thunderous steel breaks the air?  
There is no reason why so much blood  
Should be spilling over those innocent shores  
Whose people, not yet tarnished by wealth,  
Had grown safe and free under their laws,  
And unaware of the evil  
That is clogging all of Europe.  
Who is unburdening their peace?  
What wicked fury, what crude  
Impious thought disturbs their union?  
T'is the wrath of a King blind to beauty,  
And to vile ministers, and ugly cupidity.

V.

What? Not even you [people of Britain] are staying?  
How can you! You've sold  
Your own free votes to those  
Chosen for the ability  
To satiate in debauchery and rioting  
And as much in drinking and in eating.  
Oh plunder of despots!  
Aren't there enough slave sin England  
To satisfy your greed?

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that Henry Lee IV wrote a studious biography of Napoleon; clearly assigning an association, at least in his own mind, with his much loved, and lauded by himself, father.

<sup>4</sup> Alfieri, we might further note, also dedicated his "Bruto Primo" ("Brutus the First," 1788), a drama about Lucius Junius Brutus, to Washington, "The Liberator of America."

<sup>5</sup> As drawn from Caso's *Alfieri's Ode to American Independence*, Branden Press Publishers, Boston, 1976.

Must you also go to the American shores  
To play your treacherous game?  
Children of your blood,  
They're made to spend their days in plight.  
Once you were their mother;  
Now you're the witch threatening them with death  
For the past six years, and more.

*Second Ode --*  
The Warring People

II.

Caught between bondage and death  
Those generous sons of Liberty await,  
Afflicted, tired and grieved.  
Fate has all but taken their hearts,  
Not because they are lacking in gold –  
Virtue is never in need of it,  
But because they lack arms and bread.  
They stare at each other mercifully,  
Knowing they have to die for their country,  
While their women and children  
Practically starve  
Within their beloved homes.  
Hearing the little ones ask for bread  
And there being none  
Is the lowest level of human misery.  
Worse, they must bid them goodbye forever.

IV.

Yet some say: Who are  
These new liberators  
Stepping down magnanimously  
To bring together glory and results?  
Are these the new men of Europe,  
Forged on the spirit of humanity  
The likes of which is not known today,  
That have come to deal a blow to tyranny  
And to build dykes against the tides?  
Those, whom Philip derided  
For being armed with the slingshot,  
Fate would have it  
They should receive the highest virtues?  
They gained liberty with their blood;  
Now they've come to give life  
To a Liberty about to languish.

VIII.

Already the night has lifted its veil;  
From the reign of Neptune  
The sweet sails rise with the sun.  
The ship appears with the early light,  
Flying its linen against the sky,

Its beautiful and shimmering lily [France]  
Masted and unfolded to the gilded Mars.  
Fitted with provisions and their arms,  
They're already covering the fields  
In pursuit of the haughty Briton.  
What invincible sword will strike?  
Who will be the worth my subject  
To be immortalized in verses?  
Who will bring honor to his birthplace  
And make the countrymen proud?  
To him, of Muses, a trophy for all time!

*Third Ode --*  
Lafayette

IV.

Let the Goddess of Sparta  
Be the only [one] to inspire disdain  
Into this youthful heart:  
He understands and speaks no more.  
Already, he's hurled himself  
Of the stormy and evil royal court.  
Oh happy desire for fame and glory!  
He's bidding his wife goodbye.  
She, whom nature has more than made  
Beautiful and chaste,  
Now stands alone as well.  
Fearlessly, he bids here farewell  
Amidst the kisses and the tears.  
She'd rather die than let him go,  
But all's in vain, for he has gone.

V.

Why do you weep? Can't you see,  
Glory is taking him to radiant paths  
Whose imprints fill his heart alone?  
Once the novice warrior,  
Now he trains without respite  
And guards our liberty day and night.  
He's learned to use his weapons  
To kill as must be done.  
He is a marvel to the Americans,  
Who are impressed with this one man;  
Every part of his body,  
His each and every vibrant cell  
Long for that freedom,  
Of which no other is convinced as he.  
So, let your weeping turn to song,  
For tears are not becoming to your eyes.

VI.

See for yourself: he's a born leader;

Prudence and valour abound.  
He's like those great ones  
Whom men willingly obey and love  
Though they may be much the elders.  
His enemies are awed  
By the respect he commands;  
Even the most envious of men  
Respects the nobility of his ways.  
Look what the gilded lily  
Has brought together: men ready to battle  
There, where the action is fierce,  
Where in the midst he will shine.  
Mars and Liberty are his friends:  
He will be known forever  
So long he leaves the corrupted court behind.

*Fourth Ode --*  
Praises for General Washington

II.

But where so suddenly  
Has this burning fantasy taken me?  
Doors are opening wide,  
And the caves of Tenebris within sight:  
Let him enter into eternal darkness  
He who has glazed his heart with steel.  
The Sun pushes me ahead,  
And the laws of the Abyss broken.  
I enter. Behind me already,  
The three-headed dog,  
The frightful steerman of the black river,  
And the horrendous shrieks of the damned.  
Lethes is nearby,  
The sweet river of life  
Where immortal flowers of many colors  
Embank the slow running water.

IV.

I see the once proud woman, now in tears,  
Speak to the council,  
Telling of the vicissitudes on earth.  
Her tears and stories inflame the hearts  
Of those magnanimous souls...  
"Worry not, oh Goddess," one replied;  
"The man to stimulate the heroes  
Is coming with all his sacred fury.  
Do your part to help regain  
The liberty they have lost,  
And fight against the enemy;  
Destroy them if you must.  
We're going to give you back  
That which you have us once:  
Gather the gifts you can find,

And let your champion honor them.”

VI.

With her noble booty secure,  
The Goddess spread her wings  
And flew joyfully forth  
To bring the news to the camp,  
And to join the league of her brothers –  
All sworn to preserve their traditions  
Or die a thousand deaths  
As old man Cato [the younger] did in Utica.<sup>6</sup>  
In complete admiration,  
They gather around the captain  
To listen to his words.  
In full view of his fearless eyes,  
She displayed the many gifts,  
Enough to make the enemy fall.  
Come, Englishmen, see for yourselves  
How vain your efforts will be now.

VII.

I’ve seen your arrogant faces before:  
Large numbers alone raise your chins.  
The good they will do you now  
Against a leader with solid men behind  
And each respecting the other’s life,  
Fighting as they must  
To inflict their wounds  
When you least expect them to.  
For all these years, and risking life,  
The mighty stood the camp  
In behalf of the mother country  
Even to the last man and sword  
That She may never perish.  
The trap has finally worked:  
The Briton is buying his soul away.  
This is the meaning of liberty to him.

VIII.

Go, Washington, seek  
The treacherous enemies of liberty  
And deal with them you must.  
No other battle  
Shall be memorable and great  
As this one you must fight.

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<sup>6</sup> To the majority of 18<sup>th</sup> century writers, thinkers, and statesmen, virtuous (ancient) Rome was *Republican* Rome; with concomitant reference often made to Hannibal. Scarcely, by comparison, is praise ever bestowed on any emperors; except possibly with respect to the military prowess of Caesar. Simon Bolivar was one figure who drew inspiration from ancient Rome’s Republican foundations, and it was no coincidence that it was in Rome itself, on the summit of Monte Sacro in 1805, that he made his solemn and historic vow to uplift his country from control by Spain’s monarchy.

Already you're pursuing the enemy,  
Inflicting upon them your last woes.  
Oh worthy victory of your great heart!  
Few are the dead  
And the rest are surrounded,  
Ready to lay down the arms,  
The mismatched boldness,  
And their honor, if ever they had any.  
Mankind will be forever grateful  
For what you've done, of Washington.

*Fifth Ode --*  
The Peace of 1783

I.

The sweet chorus of celestial voices  
Sings over the gentle breezes  
That fill the hearts of men with joy,  
And almost restores those late martyrs:  
The cries of war have ceased,  
And blood no longer colors the rivers.  
Men seem more forgiving of each other  
While the harvests sway to the wind.  
The shepherds take heart again,  
Now that the fields are free,  
And return to their songs of old,  
While on the other side  
The kings wipe the abundant sweat  
Of their brows, pondering,  
As they sit on their gilded thrones,  
The recent undertakings and defeats.

II.

The man of the Leopard emblem,  
Who wanted a tighter yoke around his English  
And conquer a new land in the Americas,  
Has only caused the breakdown  
Of his British throne.  
The French King, with the jocund air,  
And the blonde Dutchman,  
Have achieved a peace without war;  
And the disillusioned besieger [Spain]  
Of the unconquerable Gibraltar  
Is left to brood in his own dead silence:  
This victorious league has given  
Little more than tears.  
Well can America go proudly forth  
With her first arms – an America  
That boats the image of perfect liberty.

III.

Now, dense ignorance breaks out  
Which old age itself involves,  
Showing me a whirling fire  
That shatters, burns, and turns to dust  
Any intense and impious crowd  
To make an infamous game of our service.  
It is a power that gives birth  
To a howling and impetuous wind  
That blows from the west with such force  
That in its vortex it pulls  
That most audacious and superb of plants  
And carries them forth  
Where the bad seeds take root  
In Asia as on the original soil.  
The dark clouds have disappeared;  
Faith and virtue are back again.

VII.

[Yet] How can I sing of peace  
When half the world is in arms,  
And not know why, while the other  
Live in fear, and without bread,  
Choosing to remain stupid and immobile?  
Call this liberty, which is protected  
By he who rules with absolute power?  
A war was fought,  
And the enemy never [really] slaughtered --  
Wasn't this the greatest of evils?  
And men died in its behalf.  
Can a sweet smelling potion,  
Drawn from bad weeds and given to drink,  
Enervate the bodies and minds of men?  
T'is an evil from far off India [i.e., the riches of]  
Come to enslave and make America poor.

VIII.

Marathon, Thermopyli [Thermopylae],  
The ominous day of Cannae itself!  
Those were the days when soldiers fought  
To protect their homes,  
Going from Greece to Bactria,  
Never once fighting for money  
Or being the pawns of evil leaders.  
Those were the times  
When Peace and Liberty in Athens' apron lay,  
Her men free to speak their thoughts,  
And the arts flourishing everywhere;  
But in our age,  
They're sidelined or lost.  
What am I to sing about? And to whom?  
I look around and weep:  
Force alone rules this world!

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For the complete *Alfieri's Ode to America's Independence*, with Italian text and also translated into English, edited by Adolph Caso, see:

[http://books.google.com/books?id=5IR8XHkEzKEC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Alfieri's+Ode+to+America's+Independence&hl=en&ei=81uuTtKwHfPZiAKdv-XuCg&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CDQQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=5IR8XHkEzKEC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Alfieri's+Ode+to+America's+Independence&hl=en&ei=81uuTtKwHfPZiAKdv-XuCg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CDQQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false)

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