

Beyond the Bounds: Twentieth-century Variations on the Myth of Alcestis

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1. Alcestis between Sacrifice and *Limen*

Originally combined with religion, mythic narrations differ from ritual performances because they are not compressed within rigid principles and invariable rules, but they develop from continuous modifications and combinations of the original form.

Alcestis's story, inspired by ancient folktales, is known mostly due to the heroine of Euripides's homonym play (438 B.C.) which was innovative for its ambiguous, tragicomic tone, for the happy ending and for the persistent presence of fairy-like situations. First of all it is possible to realize how the Greek drama is situated between two genres: comedy and tragedy. Moreover the myth of the woman who sacrifices herself because of her husband, Admetus, has impressed many writers and it has been proposed in different ways.

For instance, Alberto Savinio, in his *Alceste di Samuele* (1949), explains the choice of imitating this classical performance in the following important monologue:

AUTORE: Se una persona ha diritto di entrare terza tra noi, questa è Alceste. La vita, questo gioco di figure e di fatti, sembra agitata dal caso. Forniti di strumenti ottici più acuti, scopriremmo dentro l'apparente confusione una certa quale regolarità. Riconosceremo tra le innumerevoli figure alcune che si ripetono,

perché partecipano di una medesima specie. I tipi comuni noi li riconosciamo senza sforzo; non così i tipi più rari, che noi perciò teniamo per modelli unici, magari per modelli scomparsi. Bastano due soli individui a costituire una specie? Dai tempi precedenti il tempo storico, attraverso millenni e millenni non storicizzati, e attraverso millenni e millenni storicizzati, soltanto ora noi abbiamo la riprova che Alcesti non è un individuo ma una specie. Conoscevamo Alcesti di Pelia: ora conosciamo Alcesti... Il papà della signora è ancora in vita? / GOERZ: No. / AUTORE: Come si chiamava? / GOERZ: Samuele. / AUTORE: Ora conosciamo Alcesti di Samuele... Prego. (Savinio 1991: 45)

(AUTHOR: If someone has the power of becoming the third among us, this is Alcestis. Life, this game of figures and facts, seems shaken by sheer chance. Endowed with sharper optical instruments, we would discover a certain regularity within this apparent confusion. We would recognize among the innumerable figures, some which repeats themselves because they share all human species. We can easily recognize common types; unlike the rarest ones, which we consider as sole models or possibly as deceased ones. Can only two human beings constitute a species? Before historical times, through prehistoric centuries and centuries, and then, through historical centuries and centuries, only now we have the confirmation that Alcestis is not an individual but a species. We knew Pelia's Alcestis: now we know Alcestis... Is her father still alive? / GOERZ: No, he is not. / AUTHOR: What was his name? / GOERZ: Samuele. / AUTHOR: Now we know Samuele's Alcestis... Please)¹.

Alcestis can be considered as a type, a character repeatable also in different periods: until the sixteenth century she is known especially for her love for her husband; in the seventeenth century her sacrifice is explained through reason of State, finally in the twentieth century it is very important Alcestis's fascination by the idea of death.

¹ All translations of Savinio's play are mine.

Long before the composition of Euripides's play, Greek writers make reference to this myth like Homer in his *Iliad* (II, lines 711-715) or Plutarch (*Erotikòs*, 761 e) who seems to allude to Alcestis's mental disorders, probably a catatony due to a sense of guilt not defined precisely, but that could be explained with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (*Met.* VII, lines 297-349) where she is unintentionally involved, together with her sisters, in the murder of her father Pelias, king of Iolcus.

According to Pino Blasone (Blasone 2007: 4), Alcestis agrees to be taken in Admetus's stead because she wishes to expiate the wrong she has done, by substituting the father figure with the husband one. However this dark side of the story is less known than all the remaining literary variations, quoted even by Plato in his *Symposium*:

And what is more, lovers are the only ones who are willing to die for the sake of another; and that is not only true of real men but of women as well. Alcestis, the daughter of Pelias, offers a sufficient testimony for Greeks on behalf of this argument.

She alone was willing to die on behalf of her husband, though his father and mother were alive; [...] Her performance of this deed was thought to be so noble in the opinion not only of human beings but of the gods as well that, although there have been many who have accomplished many noble deeds, the gods have given to only a select number of them the guerdon of sending up their souls again from Hades and hers they did send up on admiring delight at her deed. (Plato 1986: 8-9)

Love gets a very important value and Alcestis's death is a death that allows life, not only because it assures the lover's surviving, but also because it produces renewed life for the heroine herself, both in the plot thanks to the premium of her rescue from Death (which comes only through Heracles's intervention), and especially with the achievement of an *aretè* which overcomes the boundaries of life and death for becoming a *mythos* whose immortal song will be remembered by poets forever.

In psychoanalytic terms it is possible to recognize a “chain” of desire which brings Alcestis towards a metonymic shift from her husband’s love to an unconscious death desire, then sublimated in the wish of glory and immortality.

The characters of the plot may be also interpreted by the point of view of the “border”. If the delirium itself of the young protagonist (traditionally expressed with long speeches unlike the conclusive aphasia) is a foreshadowing of the agonistic Hercules’s fight against Death, the hero has a double nature, mortal and divine. The statute of Admetus is also amphibological when, after going into mourning, although alive, he lives, like a dead man, a *bios abìotos*. Admetus’s parents are old and therefore they are near to death, but nevertheless in Euripides, Pheretes accuses the son of having exceeded with his requests and he is unwilling to step in, giving up the life he enjoys so much.

Like many other mythic characters, such as Oedipus, Antigone or Medea till the huge number of metamorphic protagonists, Alcestis’s myth reveals its connexion with the confined places between *eros* and *thanatos*. It is very important, in this respect, the perspective suggested in Lacan’s seminars where the heroine is sometimes quoted about the theme of sacrifice and about the condition of being «entre deux», that is between life and death. The psychoanalyst considers the above-mentioned platonic text, and makes a comparison among different *catabaseis* and especially among various kinds of love.

In lacanian analysis, Alcestis is compared with Orpheus and Achilles as well. The first misses his mark and however descends alive in the hereafter world, without having Alcestis’s courage of dying for love. Achilles, according to Phedrus’s platonic speech, fights and chooses to die for the dear Patroclus, already dead, that is he chooses to follow him, overcoming in this aspect Alcestis herself, according to the semantic gradation which exists in these Greek words: *uperapotanèin* (which means “to die instead of”) and *epapotanèin* (“to follow somebody in death”).

Lacan, skilled scholar of the relationship between tragedy and unconscious desire, offers, together with a careful interpretation of

Plato, a very important key for reading the euripidean hypotext and the following *Nachdichtungen*. As Lacan underlines, Alcestis overcomes that space which is included among life and death, and it is very significant that Beauty becomes a defensive boundary between two human desires which are opposites and apparently incompatible:

Il est impossible à ce propos que vous ne fassiez pas le rapprochement avec ce que j'ai essayé d'approcher l'année dernière concernant la fonction de beau dans l'effet de défense où il intervient, comme barrière à l'extrême de cette zone que j'ai définie comme celle de l'entre-deux-morts. S'il y a deux désirs chez l'homme, qui le captent, d'une part dans le rapport à l'éternité, et d'autre part, dans le rapport de génération, avec la corruption et la destruction qu'il comporte, c'est le désir de mort en tant qu'inapprochable, que le beau est destiné à voiler. (Lacan 1991: 1554)

Sacrificial dimension, fixed idea to the Other, overcoming of the threshold of pain are also those elements that are due to the fundamental metamorphosis structure according to the skill theoretic perspective of Rosalba Galvagno (Galvagno 1995). Ovidian suggestions are indeed present in these Alcestis's rewritings, especially referred to Orpheus and Pygmalion.

2. Alcestis's Agony as "Passing Threshold"

Twentieth-century writers describe in different ways the moment in which Alcestis stands on the brink of life and death.

In Euripides's play the first episode begins with a maidservant, who enters from the palace in tears. When the chorus-leader presses her for news, she gives a confusing response: "She is alive. And dead" and Admetus expresses the same concept in other words. Alcestis is, according to Lacan, «entre deux morts».

Even if, in the Greek theatre conventions, time of death is excluded from the scene, other characters of the ancient play tell the last moments of Alcestis's life. The heroine, on her death-bed, requests that, in return for her sacrifice, Admetus never marry again and her husband agrees to this and also promises to lead a life of solemnity in her honour.

Alcestis's agony may be understood in the etymological meaning of *agon*, in the sense of fight, and her hallucinatory visions are compared to a sad navigation, a *nauklerìa*, with reference to the ferryman's boat of Hades. In her delirium it is evident the division of Alcestis's identity and the coexistence of two opposing impulses: the attraction towards life with all its joys and a strong death desire (Freud 1986).

In the wonderful imitation of this myth of Rilke (1907), with his poem entitled *Alkestis*, there are proposed in an original way, those aspects of "boundary" which appear in the plot. The whole Rilke's story is condensed during the wedding day and the heroine is a virginal creature who gives up her married life before starting it, differently from Euripides's play where Alcestis symbolizes marital and maternal love. Alcestis is here an ethereal figure, a fading and solitary girl similar to Eurydices's Rilke who doesn't remember her life in the world anymore.

Admetus and Alcestis do not speak to each other: the first is frenetically negotiating with his parents and his friends, asking to die instead of him while the woman speaks already a death language which only *Thanatos* can understand, but she is aphasic with the others and, like the euripidean heroine, she communicates with her lover only with her shifting glance: «Doch wie er wartet, spricht sie; nicht zu ihm. / Sie spricht zum Gotte, und der Gott vernimmt sie, / und alle hörens gleichsam erst im Gotte» (But as he waits, she speaks: not to him. / She speaks to the god, and the god listens, / and all hear, as it were, within the god; Pattoni ed. 2006: 147-150; Rilke 2001). In the poem Alcestis lives in an intermediate condition: she is alive, but is already oriented in another direction; she is divided between Admetus's love and the irresistible pulsion towards a silent *Thanatos* (unlike from Euripides's

version where Death is very talkative). Alcestis is both frail and strong for her ability of talking with the underworld and she is a suffering medium («Gasse») of an extraordinary communication because she is the only one who is able to overcome the boundaries: «Denn keener ist zu Ende / wie ich es bin» («For no one else is finished, as I am»).

This myth's version has been differently interpreted, in her passing threshold many critics understand the metaphor of wedding as metamorphosis, that is the passage from young age to adulthood (Pattoni 2006: 28-33). Alcestis gives the last farewell to her adolescence and to her virginity for beginning a new life together with her husband.

Like for Persephone, the wedding symbolize a peculiar form of death. According to this perspective it is possible to read the following dialogue with the God: Hat sie dir nicht gesagt, da sie dir auftrag, / dass jenes Lager, das da drinnen wartet, / zur Unterwelt gehört?» (Didn't she tell you, Artemis, when she commanded this, / that the bed, that one which waits inside, / belongs to the other world below?»).

Even Marguerite Yourcenar, in her *Le mystère d'Alceste* (1963), reads the myth in its passage value and she proposes an Alcestis's description made by Death itself: «ce soir, je l'accoucherai de son âme, et elle mourra, tuée comme par un enfant», by Apollo who remembers all the things that the young woman would miss forever and by her neighbours who have the role of classic chorus with the *topoi* of *consolatio, non tibi soli, cronos iatròs*.

Both Apollo and Death are able to generate metamorphoses in order to conquer two boundaries worlds, the one characterized by light and the other by darkness.

The whole text is full of mournful shifts, also thanks to the medium of other characters, such as Leone and Basilio who are respectively a ferryman and a harvester. Also in Yourcenar's play Alcestis is a living dead («Alceste n'est plus qu'une ombre, un fantôme qui s'attarde parmi nous pour qu'on lui dise adieu», *ibid.*: 213) and she defines herself in a very similar way to Alcestis's lacanian words:

Mourante, je me sens devant toi, vivant, com me devant une créature d'une espèce différente, inconciliable étranger! Placée sur les limites de deux mondes, tous deux m'effrayent, et j'ai presque aussi peur de toi que d'un fantôme....Et ce n'est pas seulement de l'épouvante, c'est de la haine! Je hais tes yeux, qui enregistrent les progrès de ma mort! Et ce n'est pas seulement de l'épouvante, c'est du dégoût! (*Ibid.*: 117)

In this French tragicomic version, Alcestis has an ambiguous feeling between love and hate for her husband that she defines her wound.

Sacrifice and death are described in the scene («Elle n'a rien fait que soupirer et se tourner sur le côté comme une petite fille», *ibid.*: 122) and there is also a comparison with other mythical characters, like Helen and Antigone, who had the courage of sustaining their choices:

Alceste! Alceste! Elle est aussi morte qu'Hélène, aussi morte qu'Antigone, aussi morte que l'oiseau qui mourut l'an dernier... Te rappelles-tu cet oiseau, Alceste? Et ce jour va finir, ce jour où mourut Alceste...Et je serai séparé d'elle par une nouvelle nuit, par un nouveau jour... (*Ibid.*)

3. Admetus and the *Agalma*

Admetus's character is much more controversial than Alcestis's one. In this study, instead of taking side with Admetus's behaviour or sing the praises of him for his hospitality, we will connect Alcestis's husband to his Desire.

If Alcestis, at least in the twenty century rewritings, wishes to die, Admetus is the opposite but his choice of living will conduct him towards an unlife. Moreover he will delegate a third character to save Alcestis (with the risk of giving Heracles a chance with his wife, like in Yourcenar's play).

Even if Admetus has a very strong self-preservation instinct, he is however deeply and sincerely sad for the loss of his love “object” and, at this moment, Alcestis’s story has many contact points with Pygmalion’s one and all the other plots concerning the relationship between men and simulacra.

In Euripidean’s version, the boundary condition of the woman is materialized by Admetus’s wish to forge a statue depicting the dead wife, as a substitutive object which makes the absent present. Euripides’s play concerns the *agalmatofilia* because Admetus imagines to lay in bed with the *kolossòs* in order to embrace it and facilitate Alcestis’s appearance in his dreams. There is moreover a singular correspondence between image and name, that is, in an analytic perspective, subjectivity is a fusion among body and language. In fact Admetus imagines to call Alcestis’s name during these substitutive embraces. As Bettini (1992: 25-38) tells, the statue will seem more alive after being called and Admetus will believe to embrace his wife, without having her truly.

Besides the name “Alcesti” could derive from the Greek term *alkè* (which means “strength” and “power”, but also “fit”) and from the verb *alèxo* (“to keep away”). The name suggests the defensive value of this character that, with her brave sacrifice, keeps away Admetus’s death.

The statue is also an important sign of fidelity, as its presence will take away other women from the nuptial bed. Even Alcestis’s awakening from death can be viewed as a transposition of Pigmalyon’s myth, as it appears clearly in the following passage, taken from Yourcenar’s play:

Hercule: Alceste!... On t’appelle, Alceste!

Alceste: Qui est Alceste ?

Hercule: C’est le nom que ta mère t’a donné lorsque tu gigotais, petit morceau de chair nue au bord du foyer, c’est le nom que tu as appris à écrire sur l’ardoise de l’école, le nom que ton mari répète dans les larmes... [...]

Hercule: Lève-toi... Secoue cette neige invisible qui te fait si blanche, jeune Alceste... Ne vois-tu pas que tu es pareille à une voyageuse couchée sous l'avalanche, et que le froid de la nuit induit mortellement à dormir... [...]

Alceste: C'est bon de ne plus devoir lutter avec sa pauvre chaleur humaine contre le froid du marbre, d'être soi-même devenue marbre...

Hercule: Secours-moi, Père éternel ! Tes éclairs rampent au bas de l'horizon, écriture divine, mais je ne puis lire les commandements inscrits au ciel... J'embrasse tes genoux, Alceste, je baise tes mains, je jette sur tes épaules mon vieux manteau imprégné d'une odeur humaine, j'oppose cette pauvre chaleur dont tu parles au froid infini de la mort... Ah! Tes bras si raides se font plus flexibles, lianes autour du chêne... Alceste! (Yourcenar 1971: 150-151)

It is a description very similar to metamorphic myths with a true change of state among two different conditions through the passage from the cold marble to the warmth of a body alive, similar to Pygmalion. Other differences from the Greek model are evident in Alberto Savinio's play when Teresa comes back from the underworld thanks to her painting that, like in *Dorian Gray*, is the medium among life and death.

4. Savinio and his Jewish Alcestis

Alberto Savinio publishes his *Alcesti di Samuele* in 1949, and his play is first staged by Strehler at the Piccolo Teatro of Milano in 1950. This *pièce* for the theatre is inspired by a true story proposed in a mythical key.

The Italian writer was deeply impressed by the vicissitudes of the Jewish wife of Dr. Alfred Schlee, whose name was Teresa, who committed suicide after Nuremberg's laws in order to avoid that her

husband, director of one of the most important musical publishing houses of Wien, was forced to leave his job or to divorce:

Quello che rispose lui non lo so e qui non importa. Sua moglie, per liberare lui, si uccise. A me, nella penombra di quella sala di teatro, balenò l'analogia tra la morte volontaria di quella moglie ebrea e la morte volontaria della moglie di Admeto. Morte che fa vivere. La nuova Alceste mi apparve in una gran luce. Così è nata questa tragedia. Nascita vera. Da questa piattaforma di verità, ricomposta tale quale nelle prime scene, si parte verso un'altra verità. Anche più vera. (Savinio 1991: 11, corsivi nel testo)

(I don't know what he answered and it doesn't matter. His wife committed suicide in order to set him free. In the faint light of the theatre's hall, the analogy between that voluntary death of this jewish wife and the voluntary death of Admetus's wife flashed into my mind. Morte che fa vivere. The new Alcestis appeared to me in a great light. That is how this tragedy was born. A true birth. From this platform of truth, which is composed again exactly the same in the first scenes, another truth is shown. Even truer).

In this play the passage between the two worlds, and so between life and death, is realized not by Hercules, but by President Roosevelt, bourgeois hero who does his *catabasis* to rescue Teresa. He is dead, but he lives in his heroic soul, an important exponent of Europe after the war which considers America as a place of happiness and prosperity.

Therefore Savinio brings Hercules's function out:

Ercole, venuto a conoscenza del lutto che ha colpito la casa di Admeto si offre di scendere tra i morti per riprendere Alceste e restituirla a suo marito e ai suoi figli. Quale motivo personale spinge Ercole? Quello di riparare una *gaffe*. Piccolissimo. Il resto è tutto bontà, generosità, altruism. (*Ibid.*: 98)

(When Hercules is aware of the mourning which has reached Admetus's house, he volunteered to go to the underworld to rescue Alcestis and to bring her back to her husband and her children. What personal reason forces Hercules? None. Just righting a *gaffe*. It is a very small reason. The rest is all goodness, generosity, altruism).

In the second act there is the *Kursaal*, an intermediate space where the souls stop waiting their complete purification from earthly passions.

Alcestis is not aphasic like Euripides's heroine and she wishes to speak about her story and to explain her choice, but she is also annoyed at coming back from Hades. Her married life is remembered through *Tristan and Iseult's* music, with all the ambition and the pride of being the wife of the man she loved. She tries to attract her husband and not her children:

Lascio, passando la mia immagine dentro questa cornice, come da viva, [...] attaccavo il mio mantello all'attaccapanni... Eccomi pronta! E tu?... Ti parrà di aver traversato una gola. Lunghissima e stretta. Buia e irta di macigni. E finalmente uscire sul mare. Su un mare libero, infinito... Paul! Questa libertà, questo infinito sono io che te li do. [...] Ti parrà di aver attraversato un corridoio. Un corridoio molto lungo e molto stretto. Un corridoio tanto lungo e tanto stretto, quanto lunga e quanto stretta è stata la tua vita. (*Ibid.*: 187-188)

(I leave, while I am transferring my image within this frame, just like when I was alive, and I hung my mantle to the clothes-hook... Here I am ready. And you?... You will feel as if you had crossed a gorge. A very long and narrow one. Dark and strewn with boulders. And finally you will reach the sea. A free, endless, infinite sea... Paul! I am the one who gives you this freedom, this infinity. [...] You will feel as if you have crossed a corridor. A very long and narrow one. A corridor which will be as long and narrow, as long and narrow your life has been).

In this original mythical version, the «buona Signora», that is Death, reaches Paul himself who begins with her wife a new marriage. They will be soon forgotten by both sons and parents because the firsts will speculate to be born by an artificial fecundation, the others will choose to live by shutting all the doors, in opposite to the open doors of Admetus, whose legendary hospitality, was described in Euripides's play:

Madre: Che buffo vederti in piedi! Noi che stiamo sempre seduti. *Padre:* Sempre. E se qualche volta ci alziamo, è per chiudere. Soltanto per chiudere. Noi siamo quelli che chiudono. (*Gli viene un'idea. Si ferma*) E se per una volta provassimo a non chiudere? [...] *Madre:* Non si può mai sapere. Si è chiuso fino adesso: continuiamo a chiudere. Ti do una mano. (*Ibid.*: 194-195).

(*MOTHER:* That's funny to see you standing! We are always seated. *FATHER:* Always. And if we stand up sometime, it is only in order to shut. Only to shut. We are the ones who just shut. (*He has an idea, he stops*). And what if, just once, we tried not to shut? [...] *MOTHER:* You never know. We have shut up to now: let's go on shutting. I will help you).

In the epilogue the underworld is made up by the immobility which is the death in life.

Among the numerous myth's versions, only in the anonymous *Alceste* (Salanitro 2007), included in *Anthologia Latina*, the story finishes sadly with the definitive sacrifice of Alceste, but for all the other rewritings, the critics always talk of happy ending.

Actually all the solutions proposed in Alcestis's rescue of death show all the difficulties which are placed in the perspective of the double overcome of the boundary between life and death. This *limen* is often depicted as a door, which indicates Admetus's house, but also the door of Hades that is shown in the paintings, like in the mosaic of the *Tomba della mietitura* (Baldassarre 1996). The coincidence between the two doors is in *Alkestis's* Rilke where Admetus follows Thanatos

and Alcestis: «Der stürzte taumelnd zu den beiden hin / und griff nach ihnen wie im Traum. Sie gingen / schon auf den Eingang zu, in dem die Frauen / verweint sich drängten» («*He plunged, staggering, towards the two, / and grasped at them as if in dream. They were already / going towards the entrance, into which the women / crowded, sobbing*»).

In other plays, like Giovanni Raboni's *Alceste o la recita dell'esilio*, the *oikos* is substituted with the theatre.

Alcestis's aphasy can be seen in Euripides where there is also a proof of fidelity, similar to the conclusive episode of Penelope and Ulysses in the *Odyssey*; in the imitation of Yourcenar Alcestis who wakes up in the arms of Heracles till the attraction towards underworld of Teresa in Savinio where she proclames the abolition of boundaries between the two worlds:

Noi vogliamo durare. Non è vero? Durare. Questo solo ci interessa. Durare così come siamo. Come siamo ora. Noi amiamo la vita e odiamo la morte. [...] Anche se quello che ci aspetta, e in fondo ci attira, non è la vita, ma la morte. [...] Ora noi sappiamo che anche i morti amano la morte e odiano la vita, pur sapendo che quello che li aspetta, e in fondo li attira, non è la morte ma la vita... Ma allora?... Allora se non è zuppa è pan bagnato. Allora noi siamo come loro e loro sono noi. Allora non c'è più noi e loro, ma o soltanto noi o soltanto loro... Che strana cosa! (Savinio 1991: 191)

(We want to be everlasting. Don't we? To last forever. We are interested only in it. To last like we are. Like we are now. We love life and we hate death. [...] Even if what expects us and attracts us from the bottom of our hearts, is not life, but death. [...] Now we do know that even the dead ones love death and hate life, although they know that what they expect and what attracts them deep inside is not death but life. What then? So we are like them and they are like us. Then it's six of one and half a dozen of the other... So there is no "us" and "them" but or only "us" or only "them" ... What a strange thing!).

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