

CHAPTER VII

SEVEN YEARS OF STUDY AND HOPE

Nowadays it is easy to reach the castle of San Antón from the city of La Coruña, and it is also a pleasant trip, since one only has to stroll for a few hundred metres on a long causeway extending from the busy port. But that was not the case in the 18th century, when the fort was isolated on a rock and it was impossible for anyone to reach it in a small boat when the sea was rough.

It was precisely this remote location that had, for many years, made the castle an ideal place to imprison troublesome characters. Before Malaspina, it seems, the elderly Macanaz had been kept in the fortress for some time, and soon after him the liberals Porlier and Villaroel were sent there. But the fact that the “guests” were illustrious people must not lead us to believe that the stay there was pleasant, or that the regulations were indulgent. Undoubtedly the fortress’ governor received Malaspina with profound respect and sincere cordiality. But the government’s orders were strict, and at least for the first two years they were followed rigorously.

By pure chance, Malaspina shared his confinement with another prisoner who had the last name of the most famous navigator of all time. It was Don Mariano Colón y Larreategui, the 12th Duke of Veragua, a descendant of the great Christopher Columbus. His only crime was to have revealed an intrigue in which Godoy, at the beginning of his career, tried with the help of a group of Tuscans to discredit the Count of Floridablanca.

The first months were times of extreme duress, after which a pact of honour was established between Alessandro and the functionaries in charge of his surveillance. They allowed him freedom of movement on the esplanade of the castle (by which he could avoid, at least during the day, the lethal humidity of his cell) in exchange for his promise not to take advantage of this concession by trying to escape. And so it was. Probably through a servant or guard, Malaspina managed to obtain some books, was able to receive letters from his friends and his brother (although except for a few occasions he always destroyed the letters in order not to leave any evidence of these favours), and above all was able to write again.

With boundless confidence that he would soon be treated with justice, he occupied himself mainly by furthering, as much as possible, various attempts to have him freed. It was thus that he wrote to Azzo Giacinto on May 14, 1796:

I would like our mother and you together to send a memo to the King via the Minister of State. Write at length about the family situation, the age of our mother, my past services, the honours I have received because of them, and my proven zeal for the service of His Majesty. Tell him that he must have no doubts as to my most exacting and blind obedience to whatever conditions His Majesty might place on my liberty. Mention the services of our uncle, the Duke of Fogliani, etc., and, if it does not inconvenience you, send a copy to the Prince of Parma. Do this without compromising yourselves with hostile expressions toward my oppressor. Instead, invoke his protection by asking for his mediation, as well

as that of Her Majesty the Queen. Let us leave aside, for the moment, my philosophical ideas or any depiction of what I have been suffering.

Toward the end of the year, he himself sent a petition to the King in these terms:

Sir:

Don Alejandro Malaspina, locked in the castle of San Antón, and placed at the feet of Your Majesty, states to you with the greatest respect: that after fourteen months of harsh imprisonment, with unspeakable undermining of his honour and that of his family, of his limited means, and of his health, he suffers increasingly, because of the local conditions of this prison, from the terrible torments that exhaust him.

And therefore, relying on the clemency of Your Majesty, he dares to beg you reverently that you may see fit either to return him to his native country, commuting the present sentence to perpetual exile, or, at least, to lessen the strict severity of his imprisonment by allowing it to take place either in some other prison of this Kingdom or in the city and surroundings of La Coruña.

At the Royal Feet of Your Majesty.

Alexandro Malaspina

The letter, according to a later explanation by the author, was written “enlarging the oriental style to the limits allowed by decorum and moderate petition.” However, these “humble, just and extremely moderate supplications” did not elicit an answer.

Either directly or through his friends, Malaspina soon contacted various prominent personages with whom he had maintained, or thought he had maintained, friendly relations. With the help of his brother and Greppi, he contacted his old school companion, Marzio Mastrilli del Gallo, as well as Francisco Cabarrús, the Consul of France in Livorno, and many others. All of this accomplished nothing. Evidently his “friends,” who were quite aware of Godoy’s character, reckoned that any intervention would be useless for the prisoner and perhaps risky for themselves. He then asked Paolo Greppi to seek the intervention of the Florentine statesman Federico Manfredini, of the Parmesans Antonio Bertioli and Cesare Ventura, of Melzi d’Eril, of the Genoese Ambassador Pietro Paolo Celesia, and of Antonio Valdés. Greppi and Azzo Giacinto probably followed such directives, but without any results. They also managed to gain access to Nicolás de Azara, Spain’s Ambassador in Rome, and to Joseph Bonaparte, who gave only a vague promise.

The prisoner did not grow disheartened from the failure of all these attempts. With a Socratic calm he spent his days studying. Alessandro probably told himself that this period of forced inactivity could profitably be spent by plunging into the studies that had always vividly attracted him, but that he had never been able to cultivate because of his frenetic existence.

Cañ Antón Abril 11 98 — Rey en 16 de Sep
 Amad: Pablo. Apenas llega a mis manos la carta de Vn de A
 del: 97, que procuro agradecer al Correo que sale, previendo en primer
 lugar, no adle de esta Carta mia, sino con pocos, y por sola necesidad. He
 mos, para tiempos menos íntelicos, y menores distancias el ablar de florentina
 Nunca el Mundo ha sido mas prójimo de ellas, que es el día, y nunca han
 sido mas necesarias una conciencia sin remordimientos, y una conducta
 publica capaz de acallar, qualquiera Equivocacion. Mis sentimientos
 han sido ~~factor~~, y lo he podido sentirlos, y esto basta, los Compadreos de
 arriba, devar a Vn, que ya se acerca a su termino — Cuarenta siva
 a Vn de volver para nuestra Amistad verdadera, el debele yo asegurar,
 que mi misma Breveza era Credo de un Amor dictado por todas las
 leyes del Parentesco, y del Amigo, que la causava la agitacion continua
 de un Corazon torvado, silencioso, y leal, y que es para mí la mayor prueba
 de la bondad de Vn, el conocer, que como tales recibia mis recurrentes
 Avisos, y Correcciones — No me es facil aceptar, que sera de mí, pero
 en todas Situaciones tendré por muchissima Consolacion el saber de Vn,
 y poderle ser util en algo —
 La adjunta, es una Orden para que pague en Mexico a la disposi-
 cion de Vn trescientos Pesos fuertes, resago de una buena mia Brigua

Figure 21. Letter from Alejandro Malaspina to Fabio Ala Ponzone. Fortress of San Antón, La Coruña, April 11, 1798. The original is preserved in the archive of the Centro di Studi Malaspiniani Alessandro Malaspina in Mulazzo, Ala Ponzone Collection.

Once the vigilance of the prison authorities had diminished somewhat, the books arrived with relative ease. As he was reading, Alessandro took notes in a thick notebook.

Fortunately this valuable document has been preserved, and thus we can know of the prisoner's reading almost day by day during those extremely long seven years. Particularly at the beginning, he was careful to ask only for ancient classics and historical treatises. Apparently he felt that it would not compromise the intermediaries if they were caught giving him these volumes, since they did not relate to contemporary politics.

So Alessandro was able to read or reread Pliny, Herodotus, Plutarch, the Gibbon treatise on the decline of the Roman Empire, the history of England by Smollet, and the histories of Athens by Stuard and by Young. Obviously he had a profound interest in the history of Spain, and read a lot of González Dávila, Pulgar, Escalera y Guevara, Blancas y Carvallo, as well as the monumental *Sacred Spain* by Father Flores. In addition, he read the collection of Abrey Bertodano, and the *Fueros acordados*, a treatise on provincial rights. He also read the treatise on the war of Flanders by Cardinal Bentivoglio, and the lives of Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin, written by Aubery.

Later, Malaspina's interests concentrated on political science and the philosophy of law, notwithstanding a certain taste for the pedagogical disciplines. He reread the *Science of Legislation* by Gaetano Filangieri, and meditated upon Priestley, Vattel, John Moore, David Williams, Helvetius, Beccaria, Dougald Stewart, Boulanger, Bornot de Mably and Pastoret.

Of course, one would also expect to see comments on his old passion for the commercial and economic aspects of a society's harmonious development. And indeed, we find notes on Webster, Sheffield, Turgot, Playfair, and the Spaniards Acevedo, Sanz Reguard (who wrote a discourse on the art of fishing) and, above all, Campomanes.

Nor did Malaspina sever his ties with his former military life. Among the books that caught his eye were the *Treatise on Artillery* by Morla, those on astronomy by Bailly, *Metrology* by Pauton and the treatise on meteorology by Kirwan, as well as the voyage narratives of Bourrit, Eaton, Macartney and Dickenson, and equally the *Book of Pilotage* by Tofiño.

Perhaps as entertainment, Alessandro also allowed himself some lighter fare, such as *The Vicar of Wakefield* by Goldsmith and *The Henriade* by Voltaire. The prisoner transcribed a couple of verses from Voltaire's poem, in which he must have recognized his persecutor:

From true zeal and false, vain judges that we are,
We often take criminals for greater men by far.⁵

He took other notes from his readings that seem to have reflected upon his own situation. For example, from Howard: "For each prisoner there is an average of two people outside – family members – who suffer;" and from Gibbon: "It was a Roman maxim that every adulteress is capable of poisoning her husband." But more noteworthy still is the transcription of a page in which Filangieri describes the physical and psychological conditions of an innocent prisoner under a despotic regime:

European legislators, amidst the opulence and ostentation, the luxury, the throne and palace pleasures, amidst the fabricated happiness of the courtesans and the

⁵ *Du vrai zèle et du faux, vain juges que nous sommes,
Souvent des scélérats ressemblent aux grands hommes.*

harmonious sounds of the musicians, will never hear the sighs of the unfortunate ones who suffer the whip of your barbarous laws. Even a sensitive man needs to have experienced and known evil in order to feel it. Unfortunately the kings' hearts generally lack one or the other. ... Leave your pleasures behind for a moment and go into the prisons where thousands of your subjects languish because of the viciousness of your laws and the stubbornness of your ministers; glance through those sad monuments to men's miseries and to the cruelty of those governing them; approach those horrific walls where human liberty is locked in irons, and where innocence cohabits with delinquency ... where lies buried neither the country's enemy, nor the traitor, nor the paid assassin, nor he who violates the laws, but the innocent citizen, maligned by a hidden enemy, one who has had the courage to proclaim his innocence before a judge who is predisposed against him or corrupted. ... I will always remember that persecutions and misfortunes are honourable when they are accompanied by the sighs and the tears of the weak to whom one has tried to lend a helping hand as daring as it is impotent.

The parallels between this fragment and Alessandro's situation in La Coruña are so numerous and specific that for years its authorship was attributed to the prisoner, before being restored to the Neapolitan jurist. But if Malaspina took the time to transcribe such a long passage, it must have been because he agreed with its opinions, and thought that he could not have expressed them better.

But reading, by itself, did not satisfy the civil and political passions of the enlightened Malaspina. He needed to create, to organize, to propose. It was because of this strong intellectual impulse that the prisoner conceived the idea of writing a history of Spanish coins from the Carthaginian era to his own times, a task that he felt no one had yet accomplished successfully.

A determining factor must have been his reading of *The Voyage to Greece of Young Anacharsis* by Jean-Jacques Barthélemy. This author, an amateur numismatist and archaeologist, had written a curious historical novel whose protagonist, the young Anacharsis, was a character taken from Graeco-Roman literature. The author used this device to illustrate Classical Greece in its different aspects. Interestingly enough, the plot bears some resemblance to Malaspina's travails. The young Anacharsis, born in Scythia, undertakes a long voyage to Greece and acquires a broad knowledge of this world that is so different from his homeland. Upon returning to his country, the youth decides to tell his people about some of the religious practices he had discovered in Greece, but he is arrested and condemned to death by the king.

It is possible that some friend of Alessandro had provided him with this work for the purpose of encouraging him, since the sentence given to him was lighter than that of Anacharsis. Be that as it may, what impressed Malaspina was a long historical note that appeared as an appendix to the volume. The note was on the effective value of Greek coins from the classical period, and Alessandro believed it could be a useful source for reconstructing the monetary, rather than the numismatic, value of Spanish coins during the Carthaginian period. He then tried to obtain works useful to the study of later periods, and finally he put pen to paper.

He drew information from publications on a very wide range of different topics. Some is quoted in the aforementioned notebook, while some was gathered from the

works of Diego de Covarrubias, Florián de Ocampo and Ambrosio Morales, as well as from Pedro de Alcover, Sancho de Moncada, Ignacio López de Ayala, Miguel Alvarez Ossorio, Pedro de Cantos Benítez, and many others whom he quoted more often to refute than to praise. Other important sources were *Autos acordados* and the *Seminario erudito*. For periods closer to him in time, Malaspina used mainly Campomanes, Cabarrús and Adam Smith, and he also checked some of the papers published by the Economic Society and the Patriotic Societies of Madrid and other cities.

The author was aware that he had very limited sources, and was quick to emphasize the fact, as we see in his Introduction to the *Tratadito [Brief Treatise]*:

The retreat in which I live has, in truth, not allowed me to consult all the books and documentation necessary ... but if one notes that the sources have usually dealt more with conjecture than with facts, and in [interpreting] the old laws and writings have confused the genuine coins with the adulterated ones, those of copper or alloys with those of silver and gold, and the nominal values with the legitimate ones, one might speculate that the actual dearth of authors has been helpful, since it has freed me from the kind of scientific slavery that modesty, fear or weakness usually imposes.

In any case, aware of these constraints, and quick to point them out, Malaspina wrote a monetary history of Spain in sixteen chapters, including tables and notes on those points which, according to him, needed clarification.

It is precisely in these notes where Malaspina's boundless passion for reform comes unexpectedly to the surface, although in the last chapter he proclaims with truly exaggerated ostentation, "I would not like at the present to wear the hateful costume of a censor or lover of reforms." In spite of his disclaimer, the fact is that he proposes a small reform. Or better, he drafts "some ideas on how to unify all the coins of the kingdom and make a more universally acceptable and intelligible use of them." And he adds:

I will not repeat the individual advantages it would produce. Any dispassionate man and lover of the public welfare will be reminded of them by recalling even briefly the inconveniences mentioned some paragraphs earlier. As far as coins are concerned, we are fortunate that public opinion has always ruled, and not arbitrary judgments. This serendipitous situation assures us that a system in thrall to that same opinion cannot cause serious harm, and must consequently be welcomed by all who wish for a beneficial social order.

He concludes by suggesting that the new decimal system, "recently adopted in France with great scientific pomp," be allowed to coexist with the old and well-proven duodecimal system. Clearly, Alessandro continued to go wilfully against the grain.

In his *Brief Treatise* the author also asserted that he could make important additions to his work if he were permitted to consult the archives of the Northern Provinces of the Peninsula, and that these contributions would be quite useful to the government.

At the time, Alessandro was going through a hopeful period. Godoy's fortunes had slipped for the moment, and the government was headed by Antonio de Saavedra. The prisoner knew that his friends were working more freely and intensely than ever for

his release, which he believed now to be near at hand. Perhaps this was when he managed to get a copy of the first part of his *Brief Treatise* out of the prison. It reached Bauzá, who kept it for years, although he did not dare to show it to anyone until after Malaspina was freed and had departed for Italy. Moreover, Alessandro's illusions lasted only a few months, since Godoy soon formally resumed power, which in fact he had never relinquished.

The following year – 1798 – we find Malaspina occupied by aesthetic matters. To be more precise, we see him resuming and expanding upon a topic in which he had already shown an interest in 1795. In September of that year he had sent a letter to the *Diario de Madrid* which he had signed, for some reason, as “the man of the waistcoat and cravat.” The problem, which had been debated in Spain, France, England and Italy for a long time, was to decide whether there existed in nature a universal and invariable standard of beauty. Malaspina expressed his views in his *Philosophical Meditation on the Existence of an Essential and Unchanging Beauty in Nature*. In it he alludes to all those who had addressed the topic through the centuries. The list of authors quoted is lengthy. In addition to the works that appear in his notebook, he quotes in his *Meditation* Hume, Condillac, Saint-Pierre, Robinet, Addison, Marmontel, Montesquieu, Ferguson, Godwin, Shaftsbury and many others. Among them, Rousseau stands out for the maxim from his *Rêveries* (misquoted by Malaspina, who was forced to rely on his memory) which was chosen as an epigraph in the manuscript.

As he had already done in the *Brief Treatise*, Alessandro stresses the difficult conditions in which he had undertaken his research:

In my solitude ... I have tried to give this meditation the philosophical tone that it deserves, since in this way alone can be gathered together all the most sublime philosophy and most solid happiness that man has achieved.

Once again his conclusions are rather original. He seems to be saying that universal beauty exists in nature, but that it must not be sought in the foreheads of Spanish, or the small feet of Chinese, women.

A healthy and robust body and a soul free of misgivings or needs is all that Lycurgus prescribed for supreme happiness and what I would define as supreme beauty.

In fact, however, the problem of what is beautiful becomes almost marginal in the *Meditation*. Indeed, Malaspina appends to it many notes on the most diverse subjects. Some of them are quite lengthy and, taken as a whole, they are far longer than the main text itself. And all of them are examined with the meticulousness that is typical of the man, and in the ethical perspective from which he never wavers.

For example, Alessandro wonders in the first notes about the effect of the moon on the tides and on the shape of the earth. He writes:

During the voyage around the world of the corvettes *Descubierta* and *Atrevida*, the astronomer La Lande wrote and asked for exact observations on this important part of the physics of the globe. He was not disappointed, as we can see from his astronomical journal. However, the more important observations and

discoveries came from the capable philosopher Don José Armenteros. This resident of Manila had spent fifteen years observing the tides, whose strange irregularity, apparent in the China seas and from the point of view of the Newtonian system quite anomalous, had already been noticed by Mr. Davenport in the *Anglican Transactions*.

I do not know if these important observations have reached the people they were meant for. If they have, we shall be able to discover new patterns in the tropics which will be the complete opposites of those we observe in the high latitudes. Then the observations made by travellers along the extensive coasts of the Pacific Ocean will acquire a renewed value. Then perhaps the impossibility of reconciling them with either the Newtonian system or the polar effusions of Saint-Pierre will convince us once again of nature's aversion to any general law that attempts to force her works down to the level of our understanding.

After talking about universal gravitation, he warns:

It is very common to confuse mathematics and the persuasive power of calculation with the solidity and exactness of the laws to which they refer. It would be easy to demonstrate how much this abuse has contributed to the doctrines and writing of our century. By giving an extrinsic mathematical lustre to everything, and in particular to metaphysics and to social discussions, we have come to believe our results to be uniquely valid; and, seeking to mock the past, we have ordained, in all probability, that the future will do the same to us.

It would be beneficial to reason that philosophers could be cured of this illness if they could be persuaded that there is far more science in knowing how to ignore what one is ignorant of than in knowing how to demonstrate it.

Other passages also become quite useful in helping us identify certain philosophical stances taken by Malaspina. For example, in the following fragment the author seems to oppose the concept of man's boundless progress, which during that century so many French thinkers were resolutely defending. Alessandro tends rather toward a scheme of historical cycles which clearly proceeds from the philosophy of Giambattista Vico:

Let us remember many things: that the Egyptian harps of Thebes, described by Bruce, correspond to the times of Sesostris and Solomon in 1320 B.C.; that the arts invented by Archimedes in defence of Syracuse were imitated by Proclus in the defence of Constantinople; that the very same Archimedes discovered the square of the parabola and measured the surface of the sphere; that since Plato we have known the doubling of the cube and the sections of the cone; that the Achaean League is neither better nor worse than those of Switzerland and Holland, so admired not that long ago; that nowadays travellers still cross the sand-deserts of Egypt and Arabia in search of the most ancient and marvellous traces of the social hand of man; and finally, that in the immemorial past India and China pioneered arts, sciences, and social and governmental principles that foreshadowed and are even superior to those that nowadays we approve with our universal seal of perfection.

When Sila consulted the Tuscan wise men about certain portents occurring in Rome, they answered that they were announcing a new species of man and a renewal of the world. They had decided that there had to be eight species of men that were totally different from each other in their lives and customs, and that heaven had designated an epoch for each of these species; each epoch was terminated by a major revolution, and the conclusion of one epoch and the onset of another were announced by strange signs on earth and in the heavens.

Let us, if you please, thus characterize our epoch to be one of those, but let us be careful not to proclaim it to be more enlightened or perfect than previous ones. Let us bear in mind that the only degree of perfectibility to which our species may aspire is to look at one another with less envy and less destruction when we are not able to achieve greater benevolence or a more universal character; and that by studying our visible nature, instead of some obscure and indefinite antiquity, we may with greater finesse put in order the axioms of conduct in order to enjoy what is licit and look with indifference or contempt upon what is forbidden or cannot be achieved.

Finally, again from the *Meditation*, it is worth singling out a page in which Alessandro begins with an observation about religious character and then expands it to his own character, whose morality is absolutely unbent by compromise. It occurs in a note marked by the letter W:

Since there is no talk of dogmatic religion or politics in the moral precepts discussed here, it was my intention to include in this note a kind of philosophical declaration of my political and religious beliefs. I think this measure is necessary at a time when ideas old and new are struggling violently and with singular hypocrisy. Nowadays, the man who does not wish to contradict himself in words and deeds must first weigh and settle the limits prescribed by revelation and by his conscience and reasoning, and then simply say *nec plus ultra* to all the champions of one or another opinion who would try to convert him or to pervert him, or, what is more likely, to interpret maliciously the principles of dogma and morality.

In this manner another advantage is gained in public life: the few friends who must judge our conduct impartially, and those people who wish to entrust important business to us, can pass judgment without fear of error. 'Here are my maxims,' I would tell them as I present my notebook to them. Weigh them against my public actions, and if the friend does not like the maxims, it is up to him to argue with me. As for the powerful, let them look for someone more appropriate. And if the actions contradict the maxims, let them both despise me as weak or false.

That is the reason why some man may authorize the seditious publication of certain maxims with which his conduct has struggled for many long years. Either what he says is false or what he does is reprehensible. In both cases his authority is destroyed, his warnings are unwelcome, and his clamour merits punishment.

Plutarch correctly noticed the contradictions of the Stoics, who asserted that it is not as necessary that the orator and the laws be in agreement as it is that the life of a philosopher be consonant with his doctrine and his words.

But in the end, I have thought it more prudent to avoid such a presentation. In my present situation, if these notes accidentally fell into the wrong hands they could be used maliciously to advance sinister and contrived interpretations. Anyhow, the moral principles, after long meditation, are profoundly engraved in my heart and memory. They themselves are what firmly tell me not to proclaim them as long as I am not authoritatively asked to alter them, either on pain of death or with the promise of countless pleasures and rewards.

It is pertinent to point out that the phrase “seditious publication of certain maxims” is nearly the same as Godoy’s accusation that Malaspina propagated “seditious maxims.” In fact, Alessandro had never been able to accept this accusation, and from a distance he continued the dialectical duel with his persecutor.

A close reading of the *Meditation* elicits numerous biographical insights, the most transparent of which may be precisely the one to appear in the final note:

Dion, accused, wounded and defeated before Syracuse, in one of those moments when virtue itself seems to be swept away by men’s injustice and malice, nevertheless maintains his heroic stance; but Caesar and Alexander, having arrived from Gaul and India, and Frederick, from Prague and Dresden, only present themselves to the philosopher with the horrible face of greedy destroyers of the human race. And, on the contrary, the benevolent virtue of Timoleon, Cincinnatus, Curio Dentatus, Catinat and Washington is more apparent when we see them quietly occupied with their families and holdings than when the glory of their actions depended upon the comparative efforts of their troops and the enemy’s.

One can understand that Alessandro identifies himself with Dion, but that he would wish to be identified with Washington.

After the *Meditation* (to which during the following years he added some commentaries), Malaspina wrote a dissertation of a literary nature. Some unidentified person asked him to comment upon the analysis he had written for the Royal Spanish Academy in his edition of *Don Quixote*. Here Alessandro reflects more on the Spanish national character than on matters of style. It is a topic that aroused his interest. Language, he maintained in another of his writings, is but a reflection of the character of a people, and in this perspective he developed his “analysis of an analysis.” His conclusion was that he shared the aesthetic judgment of the Academy but that the reasons that led him to the same position were different.

Alessandro also took the time to translate into Spanish a sermon written by a French Jesuit on the *Epistles* of St. Paul. The well-known Canadian Hispanicist Catherine Poupeney-Hart has observed that the enlightened Malaspina was interested not in the subject but in the text of the Jesuit, which gave him the opportunity to write while “under censorship.” In addition, Malaspina wrote an introduction to his translation, in which, once again, he deals with the notion that a people’s language is but the mirror of its

national character. He concludes that the French and Spanish national characters are rather different.

There were probably more writings during this period in La Coruña, but not many more. In fact, from 1799 the prisoner's creative activities were interrupted, or at least greatly reduced.

He often received newspapers, from which he came to realize that the world into which he had been born had disappeared. Perhaps the enlightened Malaspina did not lament this, but he was indeed disheartened by the fact that peace between nations, and tolerance among the citizens of the same nation, still had not come to prevail. With this in mind he wrote to Greppi toward the end of 1797:

Many years of study and of travelling to distant lands have allowed me to discover the effects of the colonial system, and to understand man's character, free of our metaphysical prejudices. Our legislators study man in his "civilized" disguise, and his characteristic functions, which should help us recognize him, only serve to conceal him. In my solitary meditations I would have liked to write a chapter about the need to educate the public man with distant maritime voyages. This sea-going habit forms the solid base for the excellence and permanence of the British system. At sea, man watches daily how nature refutes his conjectures. In tempests and dangers he is abandoned to himself; his skill and his constancy are his only weapons; there are no manipulations, relatives, posts or political concessions. Our agricultural colonies would give him a true picture of the early stages of society, and the inhabitants of the delicious islands of the Pacific would show him a new system of happiness and pleasure, founded solely on the *bel far niente* [the beautiful doing nothing] that Rousseau praised so highly, instead of our European system. They would show him how to combine, if it were possible, a perpetual excitement of the spirit with a sweet tranquillity of the body.

Following this he becomes more opaque:

I will not burden you with lectures about the Roman Republic and the incessant propagation of the same principles; nor will I tire you with useless prophecies, or about my projected release, or about conditions here, and, what is more important, about the true happiness of the species. Out of the vortex, I see things perhaps with too much indifference and a certain predilection to look at men from different places with a single point of view. This can push me to shockingly erroneous conclusions. If your well-being, if a more orderly correspondence, and if a greater tranquillity on my part would allow it, I would venture some examples which at least would reveal to you my way of thinking. Political systems nowadays are what religious systems were in other times. It is necessary to purify them through friends, to maintain them to the end, and on occasion to pass as a heretic, while hearing oneself say, aside, *Noli me tangere* [Touch me not].

In any case, he maintained his serenity of spirit:

You know that I have lived at sea for twenty years in continuous deprivation, so that anything that would bring discomfort to someone else is for me, to tell you

the truth, no more than a simple joke. As far as the spirit is concerned, I can swear to you that I could not be more tranquil, since I have not been incessantly preoccupied by the fear of straying one way or another from the righteous path, or by considerable apathy, or by depression. The cause that brought me here makes me repeat that, given the same circumstances, *I would do the same a thousand times*. I believe that the successive measures against me, and the way I have endured my misfortune, will serve me well once they are known to the tribunal of the few friends who have always been the judges of my heart and of my acts.

In 1798 he wrote to his favourite, Fabio Ala Ponzzone, who was in New Spain, where he remained for many years:

We shall leave for less unhappy times and lesser distance the talk about adventures. Never has the world been more full of them, and never has there been a greater need for a conscience without guilt and a public demeanour capable of quieting down whatever blunders are made. My sufferings have been many, but I have been able to bear them, and that is sufficient.

But his sufferings were far from over. Soon he received news of his mother's death. "I can only respond with silence," he confided to Greppi. Then it was the turn of Azzo Giacinto. Driven by ideas that were more radical even than those of his brother, Azzo had in 1796 spontaneously abolished feudal law, and had received Napoleon's army with his heart full of hope for a new and more just social and political order. Later, he became bitterly disillusioned and, as had been the case with Greppi, protected himself with more moderate positions. But that did not prevent the Austrians from putting him in gaol during the short restoration of 1799, and from planning to send him into exile. It was said that his persecution had been instigated by members of the Malaspina family, those cousins who, in their reactionary zeal, saw Azzo Giacinto as a traitor to his family and to the feudal class. But in the final analysis this judgment is without foundation. In the event, he escaped from prison and then drowned in the lagoon at Venice. For Alessandro this meant not only the loss of a family member, but also a greater spiritual loneliness. And this loneliness was later increased with the death in 1800 of Paolo Greppi, and the increasing hostility over money matters of his brother Luigi.

On top of all this, Alessandro's health was deteriorating. According to a certificate issued in February 1799 by Doctor Alfonso Dionisio de Verastegui, the prisoner suffered extensive pains, bloatedness, fainting spells, intestinal occlusions and depression. The fortress chaplain let him use his room, which must have relieved Malaspina quite a bit, but it is plausible to believe that the depression persisted until the day he was released.

We do not know if the prisoner looked to the sea from his window during the afternoon of June 5, 1799, but if he did he could not have missed seeing a ship leaving the harbour on its way across the Atlantic. It was the *Pizarro*, and it carried Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bompland, who were on their way to see Latin America "with philosophical eyes." Later on, in his historical account of the trip, Humboldt wrote:

Our eyes remained fixed on San Antón's Castle, where the unfortunate Malaspina languished in a state prison. On my way from Europe to visit the lands that this illustrious traveller had explored so fruitfully, I would have liked to occupy my mind on a less sorrowful subject.

The few friends he still had continued to take care of him. In a letter that arrived from Cádiz in 1800, Malaspina listed the pleas that Federico Gravina, by then Minister of Spain in France, could take to the First Consul, Napoleon. In the event, the gaol sentence was commuted to perpetual exile from Spain and its possessions, thanks to the particular insistence of Napoleon. But two more years had to pass before this actually happened, and other appeals had to be added to Gravina's—one from Francesco Melzi d'Eril, who in the meantime had become Vice-President of the Francophile Italian Republic, and one from the Russian navigator Johann Krusenstern, although we do not know how useful his intervention was.

In any case, the iron gate of the castle was opened for Alessandro before the end of 1802. But the decree of exile was no less bitter for him than his gaol sentence. The former officer had to leave Spain immediately, and on penalty of death could not return.

Malaspina first headed for Cádiz. There he embarked on a merchant frigate bound for the Balearic Islands. Near the coast of Palma he changed to another ship which took him up to Port Vendre. On a third vessel he headed for Genoa. The bracing Mediterranean air must have buoyed his spirits, for during the trip he avidly read Turgot's *Memoirs of the Municipalities*, and he took notes with all the diligence of his better times.