

Malaspina's *Meditation on Beauty in Nature*

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Introduction

Since the recent upsurge of interest in the life and works of Alexandro¹ Malaspina began, the jury has been out on the question of whether his writings live up to his undeniably outstanding achievements as a navigator. From among his biographers, for example Dario Manfredi and John Kendrick, there have been intimations of both greatness and dilettantism. Because of the peculiar circumstances in which he wrote his mature non-professional works, namely during his ostracism and imprisonment in the fortress of San Antón in La Coruña, none has been published until the last two decades, and some remain unpublished still. A similar fate, indeed, befell the journal of his great voyage in the Pacific, which, aside from some technical sections of immediate use to navigators, did not appear until 1885, seventy-five years after his death and ninety-one years after the expedition returned to Cádiz.² For these reasons, clearly, it has not been possible to assess the merit of his work, outside the limited confines of his naval responsibilities, until now. In this paper I shall focus on an essay he wrote in 1798, the *Meditation on Beauty in Nature* (to give it its short title), and ask what it contributes to our assessment of Malaspina as a philosophical thinker.

The corpus of non-naval writings left behind by Malaspina is far from substantial. He showed early promise in his *Theses ex Physica Generali*, a textbook in the form of an axiomatisation, in Latin, of the broad philosophical principles underlying Newtonian mechanics, which was published in 1771 while he was still a student at the Clementine College in Rome (Malaspina, *Theses*).

Whether the promise was fulfilled, however, can be judged only on the basis of the mature writings. While imprisoned in the fortress of San Antón at La Coruña, Malaspina wrote four essays, of which the *Tratadito sobre el valor de las monedas de España* [*Brief Treatise on the Value of Spanish Coinage*], the *Carta crítica sobre el Quijote* [*Critical Letter on Don Quixote*] and the *Meditación sobre lo bello en la naturaleza* [*Meditation on Beauty in Nature*] have now been published (Malaspina; Black and Clemotte³). The methodologies and approaches employed in these essays are as diverse as their subjects. While all call and rely upon historical sources and contemporary scholarship, the *Tratadito* is marked by the careful sifting of empirical evidence and the *Carta* by careful textual analysis.

By contrast, the *Meditation* adopts a much more speculative and exploratory tone. On the evidence of the essay alone one can come only to a slightly disappointing judgment about its author's standing in the history of aesthetics: he was by no means a philosopher of the first order. Nevertheless, the text provides an interesting window onto the views and preoccupations of a well-read and lively intellect, one who identified strongly with the currents of thought prevalent in his day and who regarded himself, with some but not unequivocal justification, as in every way a man of the Enlightenment.

The History of the Text

The text of the *Meditation* consists of a main body and a collection of subsidiary Notes, the latter longer in total length than the former, and devoted to a wide range of issues, some pertinent, some not obviously so, with marginal comments throughout. Although the tone makes it clear that Malaspina wrote for a readership, there is no evidence that he made any attempt to have the essay published, whether or not the opportunity would have been available to him while he remained imprisoned. Eventually the small notebook containing the essay and other writings found its way to what was then the Centro di Studi Malaspiniani, now the Fondazione Malaspina, in Mulazzo.⁴

Nothing is known about the provenance of the manuscript from the death of Malaspina until 1929, the year in which it was displayed in Florence at the First National Exhibition of the History of Science, where it was reported by Carlo Caselli, in the catalogue for the Lunigiana section, as belonging to Senator Camillo Cimati of Pontremoli. According to Malaspina's will, all his effects (barring some English books and prints, and other specific exceptions) were to be inherited by his niece Teresa Recupito (the daughter of his sister Metilda Poliscena), who lived in Benevento. However, there is no evidence that it actually came into her possession, and it is unlikely that someone from as far away as Benevento would make great efforts in this regard, especially as she would have had to work through her uncle's executors.⁵

For many years it was assumed that Malaspina's friends in Pontremoli – and in particular his executors – had distributed his writings amongst themselves, perhaps with the agreement of the niece, who, it seems, exercised some diligence in regard to the preservation of her uncle's papers.⁶ It now seems more probable that his miscellaneous papers, including the notebook, lay unnoticed in the Domestic Archive of the Malaspinas of Mulazzo, until at the beginning of the 20th century the owner of the archive, Dr. Beniamino Zini, gave them to General Pietro Ferrari⁷ and Senator Camillo Cimati,⁸ both from Pontremoli and both historians of the Malaspinas.⁹ Although most of these miscellaneous papers remain unavailable, Cimati's heirs later loaned the La Coruña notebook to the Centro di Studi Malaspiniani.¹⁰

It is worth noting that in addition to the manuscript essay in the notebook from La Coruña, there is a further source for Malaspina's views on aesthetics. In its Foreword the essay refers to a letter on the same subject written anonymously to the *Diario de Madrid* in 1795. As Belén and Manfredi have shown, there is little doubt that the author of the letter was Malaspina himself (despite the fact that the subjectivist position it takes is contradicted by the *Meditation*), and for this reason the letter was included as an Appendix to the essay when it was published by Oscar Clemotte and myself.

The Argument of the *Meditation*

As the full title of the essay and its Foreword announce, Malaspina's aim is to explore the question of "whether or not there exists in Nature an essential Beauty which is unchanging and independent of the opinion of men" (3).¹¹ Further questions which arise in this investigation include whether beauty is to be found in Nature or in Art, and in what supreme beauty, if it does exist, consists. The author certainly lays out some contrasting views on these and other issues, but the text is less than satisfying in so far as its half-narrative style, the representation of the meditation as an actual episode in a fictional life,¹² allows Malaspina to be less systematic in the treatment of his topic, and in argument, than might be demanded of a serious contribution to philosophy. The *Meditation* ostensibly takes the form of a quest for supreme beauty, in which the narrator describes the path he follows towards his goal. The process, modelled on the ascent to the Form of the Good in Plato's *Republic*, might be characterised as scaling an aesthetic version of the Great Chain of Being. Various links in the Chain (for example, the horse, the human and the Supreme Being) are located on this graduated scale of beauty, in the main by appeal to the intuitions of the reader and the authority of other writers (notably Hume, Saint-Pierre and Shaftesbury). Thus the text presents the narrative revelation of a series of ideas rather than a sustained philosophical treatment, although Malaspina does employ argument to fill in the fine detail and to settle some of the subsidiary issues encountered along the way. The essay hurries to a termination rather than a conclusion, and the conclusions which are expressed, while somewhat definite, do not resolve in sufficient detail the conflicting considerations which have been raised in the body. Nevertheless, the essay is worth examining for its wealth of ideas, and there is sufficient material to permit a charitable reconstruction of arguments which the author might have made more explicit had he had the desire, or been afforded the chance, to prepare the work for publication.

Malaspina begins by considering the question of whether supreme beauty is to be found in Art or in Nature, deciding on a number of grounds for the latter (7-15). First, the beauty of Art lies only in its ability to express, through imitation, the beauty of Nature, which therefore is primary.

I compare the works of Art with those of Nature: the former are nothing but imitations of the latter, and Art becomes gradually more perfect to the extent that it approximates Nature. (9)

While at the outset the beauty of Nature is given a Platonic characterisation, as “the Form of Perfection” (7), it is soon identified with the variety and order of natural phenomena (9, 15).

Second, what we truly admire in Art is nothing but the mind of the artist, itself of course a part of Nature, which is able to discern and express, albeit to a limited extent, the order of the universe (7-9). Here Hume’s essay *The Platonist* is quoted with approval:

Consider all the works of men’s hands; all the inventions of human wit, in which thou affectest so nice a discernment: Thou wilt find, that the most perfect production still proceeds from the most perfect thought, and that it is MIND alone, which we admire, while we bestow our applause on the graces of a well-proportioned statue, or the symmetry of a noble pile. (9)

Moreover, the mind most deserving of admiration (indeed, as we shall see later (31), of adoration) is that of the Creator responsible for this order (11), and, one might add in the spirit of Malaspina’s apparent adherence to the Argument from Design, for the very existence of Nature and Art, including the mind of the human artist. Third, the imitative powers of Art are limited to external appearances: they cannot reach as far as “the qualities and internal principles most worthy of admiration” (9).

Having laid out the above views, Malaspina proceeds to a contemplation of the immense variety of natural phenomena, astronomical, meteorological and biological, and the wondrous intricacy of their interconnected organisation (11-15). He divides the phenomena of Nature into three classes, in order of increasing beauty: the inanimate, the animate but non-rational, and the animate and rational, human beings being the sole examples of the latter (13-15). This derivation of the beauty of phenomena from their organisational complexity suggests the further idea that beauty involves not only a capacity for pleasing the senses but also the ability to make useful contributions to the overall order of the universe (15). That human beings display this ability far more than the other classes tempts the author to revisit the view that the highest beauty resides in human activity – such as Art – but this temptation is resisted by returning to the contemplation of the variety in Nature (15).

Here it might be said that Malaspina misses an ideal opportunity to make explicit what seems implicit in his use of the earlier quotation from Hume: that Art and human activity in general should be seen as part of Nature and not over against it, so that the “Nature versus Art” controversy is a false dilemma. This position has some appeal as a neat solution to the broad theoretical conundrum. However, it sidesteps the real issue, namely the narrower question of whether the products of human art are more beautiful than those among Nature’s products which are not created by human beings. While it is hard to see what would count as a *general* answer to this question, it has to be admitted that it is a different question from the one which can be answered by appeal to Hume’s point, not that Malaspina seems always fully aware of the difference.

In any case, with his attention fixed on natural phenomena, the author goes on to ask in what their beauty consists (15 ff.). The sheer variety of natural phenomena, while overwhelming, is not by itself sufficient for Nature to manifest supreme beauty: also required are the myriad connections between phenomena, including their arrangement in a graduated scale of more perfect organisation, the causal laws which govern their operation, and the symbiotic relationships, among

others, as a result of which they constitute a coherent whole. Addressing Nature herself, he writes:

Is it inexhaustible variety, perhaps, which is the primary characteristic of your beauty? Are you trying to evade my investigation, my scrutiny and my eagerness to understand you? For the rapid course of the useful years of my life will come to an end before I can even learn the names of the many objects you present to me, ignorant as I am in any case of their order and utility, the indispensable basis of the admiration you should infuse in me. I would accuse you then of inconsistency. ... But no, I can see clearly and distinctly the order and economy with which you govern everything, and the links with which you connect the various ordered series of your productions; and the very impossibility of penetrating deeper, which holds me back from a perpetual and inopportune curiosity, invites me to enjoy in tranquillity all that I admire in you and thus to fashion for myself the idea of supreme beauty: this it is which is the source of the greatest enjoyment and the greatest and most enduring admiration. (15)

Thus for natural phenomena supreme beauty is the beauty of the whole universe, while particular phenomena are beautiful to the extent to which they contribute to the beauty of the whole.

In the final line of the quotation above, and in those which follow it, the discussion takes what appears to be a psychological, but on closer inspection proves to be an epistemological, turn. Malaspina explores the possibility that competing claims to the status of supreme beauty are arbitrable on the basis not so much of the objective characteristics of beautiful things as of our subjective responses to them. Thus he rejects in turn, as reliable guides to aesthetic judgment, pleasurable sensations, the passions, mere empirical perception, and the faculty of imagination (17-21). The first candidate is rejected because pleasurable give way to painful sensations when circumstances bring to bear a strong passion, without any change in the object whose beauty is to be judged, just as “love itself,

suddenly transformed into hatred owing to a real or imagined infidelity, can utterly deform an object which a little earlier seemed to give splendour and joy to the whole of Nature” (17). The passions in general cannot serve as a basis for aesthetic judgment because of “their constant flux” and the arbitrary character it would confer upon such judgment (17); mere perception seems, as it did to Buffon in a passage here quoted by Malaspina, to overlook the crucial quality of utility for human beings (17-19); and imagination cannot create the idea of an object as beautiful, or indeed any idea at all, *ex nihilo*: instead it can form only novel composites of simple ideas first presented to it by perception (19).¹³

Not surprisingly, the faculty which emerges as the proper seat of judgments about beauty is reason (21). Malaspina’s argumentative strategy, perhaps disguised initially by his over-emphasis on the issue of the unreliability of the alternatives, seems in fact parallel to that of Descartes’ discussion in his Second Meditation of the piece of wax.¹⁴ The attempt, Kantian in spirit, is to discover something about the nature of supreme beauty from the form of judgment which alone can comprehend it. Furthermore:

I observe, on the basis of what invariably takes place within me, that if *Pleasure* is the motive that first reveals Beauty, *Admiration* is the acid test which allows me to judge of its existence or non-existence. (21)

That aesthetic judgment involves the exercise of reason, and that the proper attitude towards supreme beauty is not pleasure but admiration, suggest that the essential property of supreme beauty is something, namely utility, not accessible to faculties other than reason. Reason is also able to discern, he continues, the obvious gradations in beauty among the three classes into which he has divided natural phenomena, and to conclude that there must be a highest member of this scale, the “Author of the order and preservation of the Universe” (23).

The discussion of the subjective aspects of aesthetic judgment naturally raises the topic of subjectivism. In his 1795 letter to the *Diario de Madrid*,

Malaspina had adopted an apparently subjectivist view of beauty: because of what he calls the indeterminacy of the meaning of abstract terms, as opposed to those which ascribe physical properties, and of the tendency to error in judgment induced by the passions and the association of ideas, one is forced to the conclusion that there is no “absolute point of comparison” for deciding what is “essential beauty.” If this exists, it does so merely “[i]n the imagination of men, not in the works of nature or in those of man, which are but copies based on their forms” (171). This conclusion is somewhat in tension with the definition of beauty, earlier in the letter, as “such an order in the arrangement and proportion of the parts composing a body as on examination cause in us a sensation agreeable to the sight” (169), which seems to suggest that there is an objective basis for judgments of beauty, namely whatever causes agreeable visual sensations “in us,” at least if this last phrase is taken to refer to human beings collectively. However, the tension can be resolved by taking “us” instead as referring to individual observers severally, that is by taking the definition to imply that what causes agreeable visual sensations differs with the individual and his or her circumstances. There emerges a subjectivism in which beauty is to be ascribed on the basis of nothing more than an individual’s response.

There is too little detail in the letter to say whether Malaspina was aware of the apparent tension in his view. When one turns to the *Meditation*, in any case, one encounters a more sophisticated position which tries to reconcile objectivism and subjectivism. In an echo of the scholastic argument for the existence of God in Descartes’ Third Meditation,¹⁵ Malaspina argues that “for an object to excite in me an idea of Beauty of a certain degree, it is necessary ... that the object have in itself the same degree of inherent beauty” (23). This position, based on an appeal to universal causality, is “objectivist” in the sense that it presupposes the existence of beauty as a characteristic of objects; it is also “subjectivist” in so far as it suggests that I can infer an object’s beauty from my idea of it.

At this point Malaspina assembles an array of considerations to guard against misunderstanding. First, the objectivist component of his view is

buttressed by an argument that variance in aesthetic judgment between individuals is no proof that beauty is not objective, since such variance occurs also for common-or-garden factual descriptions of the world:

Of what significance is it, after all, that each individual, according to his desire, makes different judgments about the extent to which an object possesses this property, even when he endeavours to employ all the means necessary for good judgment? In judging distances, heights, velocities and, in short, whatever results are derived from the more intricate comparisons made by our sight, are we not equally uncertain, and are not our mistakes as frequent as in the matter under discussion? (23)

Malaspina also stresses the subjective character of aesthetic judgment: it occurs only when the relevant qualities of the object are capable of being perceived and appreciated (23). That they are actually perceived by the person making the judgment is not however necessary, for, like all empirical claims, assertions about beautiful objects and their qualities can be verified indirectly. To bolster acceptance of the idea of an indirect method of verification, Malaspina uses the rather startling analogy of the in-principle possibility of detecting the transportation of quantities of silver from South America to Spain by measuring the resulting minute distortions in the earth's gravitational field (23-25).

Second, the subjectivist component is rendered more plausible by some restrictions placed on what counts as having an idea of beauty which can justify our ascribing beauty to an object. Revisiting ground covered earlier (17-21), Malaspina argues that such an idea cannot be a result of mere whim or habit, guided by appetite, the expectation of pleasure or the desire for novelty (25-27). Instead it must be formed by reasoned judgment on the basis of comparisons made by the faculty of thought:

[O]ne must draw comparisons, and my judgment will be more accurate and less erroneous to the extent that I draw comparisons which are

comprehensive, yet do not depart from reality. Furthermore, doing so is an indispensable act of the faculty of thought, and whatever relative degree of real beauty must exist in an object, whether it is perceivable or not at the moment of judging, it is evident that the material involvement of the senses, at that precise moment, is not necessary, nor can the most extensive mental examination be omitted. I should not doubt that Alcibiades was more beautiful than Aesop, although both lived more than twenty centuries ago, and even the feeblest and most prosaic account would convince me that the gardens of Aranjuez are much more beautiful than the orchard I cultivate, though I had not seen the first and the second gave me an intense and innocent pleasure.

Having noted that Nature is to be praised for offering us such a varied and graduated range of objects from which to draw such comparisons (23), Malaspina identifies the relevant form of judgment as judgment which produces *admiration*, which he defines as “an act of the soul, which, casting its glance around the real universe, judges the excellence of any particular object by how complicated, useful, noble and difficult to imitate is its composition, and by the place it occupies in the ascending order of creation” (29).

Thus, although a judgment that some object is beautiful depends on the idea I have of it as admirable, and is to this extent subjective, this idea can only truly be an idea of the object as admirable (and therefore beautiful) if the object objectively satisfies the criteria of complexity, utility, nobility and so on. Otherwise it is merely some other impression, for example of pleasure, which might easily, but should not, be confused with admiration; correspondingly, the ability to cause pleasure in us is not to be confused with beauty. In so far as pleasure is a superficial response to the superficial aspects of objects, it is only among their deeper, more significant qualities that one can find the beauty which is worthy of admiration (29).

In short, then, Malaspina recasts the pursuit of the nature of supreme beauty as an inquiry into the nature of admiration, or – as one might say – of the admirable.¹⁶ This he now takes up, first noting the following features: a) that aesthetic admiration is precisely the impression one gets from an object (such as Praxiteles' *Venus*) when it does not give one any direct pleasure (for example by rekindling memories of someone one has known); b) that the realisation that an object cannot be useful to one, in one's particular circumstances, interferes with one's capacity to admire it; c) that this realisation can also overwhelm any pleasure one might otherwise have obtained from the object (29); and d) that admiration is incompatible with a sense of horror at the existence of an object which is in some way contrary to Nature (31). These points, expressed perhaps clumsily in terms of a claimed incompatibility between admiration and other mental states, are intended, it seems, to support some objective claims about beauty itself. Thus a) reinforces the notion that beauty is not a matter of causing pleasure; b) and c) suggest that utility (or purposiveness) is an essential element in beauty; and d) that beauty involves order or harmony.

Malaspina's general conclusion about the proper object of admiration is that "admiration itself involves both of the aforesaid characteristics of Nature, *order* and *variety*, and the more magnificent the manner in which these two properties are presented in an object, the more intense and elevated, through the medium of an impartial and judicious examination, will be my perception of real beauty," an insight which in a marginal comment he attributes to Leibniz (29, endnote 49). And if Nature is admirable on account of these characteristics, then their Creator – the Supreme Being – is worthy of the highest form of admiration, namely adoration (31-33). In fact, he implies, the very existence of the Supreme Being can be deduced from the existence of these characteristics, as can be understood by anyone who contemplates the gradations of beauty and of being in the ordered variety of Nature (33; 89 – Note J).

For this reason Malaspina begins to draw us along the contemplative path towards the Supreme Being, noting first the complex organisation of animal life,

the instincts for self-preservation and reproduction, the social nature of animals, their fitness to the environments they occupy, and the rôle of death in limiting population in a given area so that a variety of species can be maintained (33). He reminds us that from the ecological point-of-view, as it were, death, so desperately shunned by human beings, is not to be feared (35). The careful study of animals, furthermore, can bring us a greater understanding of ourselves: thus, the similarities between human beings and animals reveal the operations of “both instinct and experience,” while the differences reveal our unique “faculty of reason.” It can also enable us to contribute to the “fertility and order of Nature” through taking advantage of the various ways in which our lives are intertwined with theirs. We make use of animals for food, clothing, companionship, consolation, inspiration, security, military assistance and so on, and the methods of domestication and husbandry we employ in thus exercising our dominion over Nature themselves increase the order and variety of the animal kingdom (35, 39). Our most significant achievement in this regard, for Malaspina as for Buffon (whom again he quotes), is the domestication of the horse, itself the highest and most beautiful of the animals in terms both of form and of utility. It is this achievement which vastly increases our capacities for defence, the control of Nature, and (presumably through its provision of means for faster and more far-reaching communication) the maintenance of our social and political communities (37-39).

Malaspina’s authorial contemplation of the complex interconnectedness of the immense field of natural phenomena leads him next to the human species. It is human engagement with the inanimate world and with animals which alone introduces order into their chaotic existence, and for this reason we rightly regard ourselves as possessing the highest degree of natural beauty. At the same time, we are prevented from falling prey to arrogance over this degree of distinction by the very faculty of reason which constitutes our superiority (41). The remainder of the *Meditation* is devoted to the analysis of human beauty, and to the questions: “Are there agreed standards by which to judge the greater or lesser perfection of the

human body? Will that perfection alone be enough to decide whether it is truly beautiful? Or, if something else is necessary, what would it be?" (41).

The discussion begins with a clarification of technical terms which are not easily rendered into English without artificiality, and which Malaspina does not use with exemplary consistency in the argument which follows. His main aim is to distinguish between "the perfection of the human body", the formal beauty of mere appearance, which one might call "handsomeness," and a deeper beauty which depends on character, which one might render "true beauty."¹⁷ He mentions Augustine's terms "formosus" and "speciosus" as marking this distinction, but does not himself employ them in what follows.¹⁸ It is important to be clear that the distinction is not simply one between physical and mental beauty: even the latter, for Malaspina, is dependent to a crucial extent on the moral qualities of character which lie behind superficial appearance. Beauty and Virtue are one.

As has often been the case throughout the *Meditation*, Malaspina proceeds to a number of topics (he calls them "secondary questions" to be set aside) whose relevance to the main line of thought is not always made clear. He notes first that even superficial beauty cannot be reduced to simple physical traits, such as having a foot of a certain shape or hair of a certain length (41). Male and female forms of beauty, in addition, are different yet complementary. Although he is tempted by the notion that in the animal kingdom in general the more beautiful partner is so in order to entertain the less beautiful when the latter is engaged in the tedium of caring for the young, Malaspina regards it as a testament to greater perfection in Nature as a whole that humans are not analogous to animals in this respect, and that the sexes are equal in beauty. The significant variety which humans demonstrate has more to do with their mental characteristics than with any which are physical (41). On the other hand, he claims, it is obvious that certain features – those primarily of light-skinned people – are more beautiful than those of dark-

skinned people, a fact which in the related Note Q (121-123) he insists is acknowledged even among the latter.

The response to a “secondary question” though it may be, this claim is worth dwelling on, not only for the rare look it gives us into the presuppositions tending towards racism which Malaspina shared with his era, but also for the contorted logic on which it is avowedly grounded. Two lines of argument are offered in its favour: firstly, that Nature herself demonstrates the superior beauty of light-skinned people in so far as she gradually transforms dark-skinned into light-skinned people;¹⁹ secondly, following Jefferson,²⁰ that the inner states of the light-skinned people so produced are more transparent to observation (43).

The second argument is an ingenious if flawed way of elaborating on the general principle, mentioned above, that human beauty depends on the clear manifestation of character and mental abilities. If it were true that dark-skinned faces are, as it were, inscrutable, there would be some reason for hesitating to call them beautiful in the sense (implying the obvious visibility of virtue) intended by Malaspina, but he seems not to consider the obvious point that inscrutability may be more a function of an observer’s heedlessness and ignorance (of unfamiliar modes of facial expression) than of any objective characteristics.

The first line of reasoning seems if anything even more implausible. It is based on the familiar if questionable principle that Nature is progressive, and in particular the corollary that Nature produces more and more beautiful organisms over time. In the case of a light-skinned and a dark-skinned person mating, it is suggested, the child produced is observed to be intermediate in skin-tone. For the sake of argument, let us set aside the various objections to principle, corollary and observation, in order to examine the logic by which they are supposed to justify the conclusion that Nature demonstrates the superior beauty of the light-skinned. Malaspina’s point relies on the claim that it is correct to call this process a lightening of the dark-skinned, in other words, that the child is correctly viewed as a lighter version of the dark-skinned, and not as a darker version of the light-skinned. Such an asymmetrical description of what has occurred is sustainable,

however, only if one in some way privileges the light-skinned as being the standard by which all deviating skin-tones are classed together as varieties of dark. This assignment of taxonomic privilege is of course still common among light-skinned people today, but it can have no objective basis. It merely reflects the prejudices that a light skin is more normal, more representative of humankind, or – in an extreme version – more indicative of intelligence and virtue. Thus Malaspina’s argument is in danger of begging the question, for it is the latter claim which he has set out to justify.²¹

In any case, Malaspina now moves on to his primary topic, and a matter which he considers “less uncertain,” namely the “rules governing the perfection of the human figure” (43). He begins with a reconstruction of the history of Classical art, assigning to the representation of the human figure the original purpose of setting up heroes and virtuous citizens as standards for emulation. His strategy here seems to be to approach what is truly beautiful about human beings themselves by way of what artists thought it worthwhile to portray as admirable. According to Malaspina, this activity soon became focused on the picturing of emotion, and was mediated through the creation of a canon of proportion and of standard means of representation which yet left the artist room for individual nuance (45-47). The unanimous judgment of future ages, for Malaspina, suggests that the Greeks were thus utterly successful in capturing true human beauty (47).

Yet, we are reminded, this success resides not in merely reproducing an ideal physical form, but rather in portraying the virtues which alone make a person admirable (47-49). In this portrayal it is the face which is of most importance, since it is the primary locus of emotional and attitudinal expression, hence of virtuous purpose (49-51). Malaspina further warns us against settling for external beauty in our judgment of others, and warns artists against being drawn into the easy and in some ways more rewarding task of rendering only extreme emotion, generally indicative of vice, as opposed to a more Classical ideal: “the lineaments of a courageous and divine virtue which is able to triumph over passion and adversity” (53).

Malaspina holds up the Spartans as the paragons of beauty and virtue in this sense, commenting favourably on many of their customs, including that of homosexual relations within the warrior class, though here he may confuse the details with those of the Theban institution of the Sacred Band (53-55). In his Note Y (153) Malaspina identifies his paragon of human beauty – perhaps surprisingly – as the famous toreador Pedro Romero. In more general terms, he points out the Greek insistence that beauty and virtue involve harmony, symmetry and balance, and applauds the recognition of the central importance of these concepts not only in ethics and aesthetics, but also in rhetoric, music and mathematics, as well as the understanding that thorough exposure to beauty in the latter fields teaches us to be truly beautiful and truly virtuous (55-57).²² In all of this, furthermore, it is the human being who looms largest, whose bodily proportions determine those suitable for architecture, who forms the highest subject for art and poetry, and who can only make sense of the Supreme Being in essentially human terms (57-59). Against this Classical, rather austere, ideal of beauty, the discussions which Malaspina refers to in his Foreword (3), for example about whether women from one part of the world are more beautiful than those from another, are vitiated. The potential for being truly beautiful is the potential for living a virtuous life, and so, one might add, is given with the species (59). And lest anyone object that defining beauty in terms of virtue introduces some arbitrariness in characterising the former, since “the laws of moral principle and of virtue” appear to some extent indeterminate, Malaspina quotes a passage from Hume²³ in support of the contention that there is a difference between an arbitrary and a multifaceted character. True virtue demands different actions in different circumstances, but that does not mean that any action will do in any circumstance (59-61).

Malaspina has his narrator close the *Meditation* proper with a brief summary of some of the points he has made, and a brisk evocation of the peaceful elation his contemplation has brought him. His fictitious family reappears to complete his picture of “the immense majesty and divine architecture of

Creation,” of a world full of order in variety, whose incessant yet comforting cycles of life and death are revealed by Spring and embraced to the full by the understanding mind (63).

Conclusions

We have seen, then, that in this narrative monologue Malaspina has developed an argument for a positive answer to the question, “whether or not there exists in Nature an essential Beauty which is unchanging and independent of the opinion of men” (3). He has supported that answer with an analysis of aesthetic judgment which attempts to undermine the dispute between subjectivism and objectivism through the notion that, although such judgments are grounded in our subjective responses of admiration, these responses would not arise at all unless they were caused by objective characteristics of the beautiful. This argument provides the most significant philosophical content of the text: it employs premises drawn by analogy from Descartes; it adopts a Kantian methodology (though deviating from Kant’s specific conclusions in the *Critique of Judgment*) by defining the objectivity of aesthetic judgment in terms of the limits of the faculty of reason in which admiration occurs.

Malaspina has also tried to identify the particular characteristics which thus ground judgments of beauty: in the case of the universe as a whole, they are the order and variety of its phenomena as well as their utility to human beings; in the case of human beings themselves, these concepts translate into physical beauty informed and enlivened by moral virtue. While this Classical position is plausible, it is far from original and of course controversial. So too are a number of the subsidiary reflections Malaspina offers on ethnic differences in human beauty, which do nothing to avoid the pervasive racism of the colonial era.

It is perhaps worthy of remark that, despite repeated announcements of its ultimate destination, the narrator’s journey in thought up to the Supreme Being never reaches its goal. There is no discussion of the particular qualities of this ultimate paragon of beauty, aside from the suggestion already mentioned that we

are able to attain an understanding of the Supreme Being only by investing Him with human qualities. The Deist notion of a conceptually distant, transcendent God is presumably at play here, though one retains the suspicion that, despite his many expressions of apparent adoration, Malaspina himself lacks firm belief in such a Creator.

Notes

¹ Malaspina's first name can be spelled in three ways: "Alessandro" (since he was Italian by birth), "Alejandro" (the modern Spanish equivalent, since he spent most of his life either in Spain itself, or in one or the other of its possessions, or at sea in its service), or "Alexandro" (the archaic Spanish equivalent). I have adopted the spelling which he himself employed.

² The journal has now been published in both a fuller Spanish version (Malaspina, *Expedición*) and an English translation (Malaspina, *Journal*).

³ The Meditation is published with the Spanish text and English translation on facing pages. The full title is *A Philosophical Meditation during an Early Spring Morning on the Existence of an Essential and Unchanging Beauty in Nature*.

⁴ The account which follows of the manuscript's career was provided by Dario Manfredi, Director of the Fondazione Malaspina, in a personal communication. He provided also the following notes, marked with his initials, and associated references.

⁵ [DM] The executors were Carlo Bologna, Giovanni Pizzati and Carlo Parasacchi. However, in 1810 Bologna ran into legal problems and was even gaoled on several occasions (Sforza 810-812) and Parasacchi seems never to have been involved in any direct way.

⁶ [DM] For further discussion of the niece's role in administering the estate see Manfredi's introduction to Malaspina, *Tratadito*, lx.

⁷ [DM] For further information on Ferrari see Various Authors.

⁸ [DM] For further information on Cimati see Michelotti.

⁹ [DM] On the great interest shown towards the figure of Alexandro Malaspina by the inhabitants of Pontremoli see Ambrosi; Solinas.

¹⁰ [DM] The manuscript, which remains in good condition, measures 20 x 16 cm and its pages contains generally 16 to 18 lines of script, as well as notes and frequent additions in the margins.

¹¹ Numbers in parentheses refer to pages of the English text.

¹² The meditation as narrative is fictional in more than one way: like all philosophical meditations, presumably, it is not a minute-by-minute report on an actual bout of thinking; but beyond that the first-person narrator is represented in ways inconsistent with his being Malaspina himself. For example, his surroundings are of the utmost natural beauty, not the prison walls of San Antón; and, unlike Malaspina, he appears to have a wife and family. Despite this, I shall assume that any philosophical views asserted by the narrator are those of Malaspina himself.

¹³ Malaspina reiterates in passing that, while we can admit the existence of artistic beauty, the latter pales in comparison with the beauty of the realities art represents and of the beings, considered again as parts of Nature, who as artists create it. With some carelessness he expresses this comparison in terms of some of the very criteria for judgment (pleasure, delight, relief) he has just rejected. However, his main point seems to be that beauty resides in those properties of an object which cause it to produce such reactions in a consistent and predictable manner, in other words in an objective basis for subjective response.

¹⁴ Descartes argues in the Second Meditation that judgments about such an object as the piece of wax, whose perceptible qualities change radically with changes in external conditions like temperature, are creatures of the reasoning intellect, not of the senses alone.

¹⁵ Descartes argues in the Third Meditation that the existence of God follows from the fact that Descartes finds in himself an idea (of God) with a supreme degree of “objective reality” along with the principle that such an idea can be caused only by something which exists with a proportionate degree of “formal reality.” One should note that what Descartes means by “objective reality” is the kind of reality possessed by ideas, not what one might mean by it today in the context of a discussion of objectivity and subjectivity.

¹⁶ Like many of his contemporaries, and predecessors like Locke and Berkeley, Malaspina is not always careful to distinguish sensations from the qualities which give rise to them, often referring to members of both categories as “ideas”. However, most of his insights can be formulated without repeating this looseness in expression.

¹⁷ Throughout his *Meditation* and the associated Notes, Malaspina uses two words (and their cognates) for “beauty” (and its cognates): “belleza” and “hermosura,” with or without initial capitals. While his use does not have the consistent rigour often demanded of technical terms in philosophy, it is clear from his discussion that the distinction is on occasion employed to emphasize the difference between aesthetic beauty in general (*Belleza*) and the form which can be attributed only to human beings (*Hermosura*). Malaspina adds to his discussion of the distinction in Note P (115-121), where he further subdivides *Hermosura* into two varieties: real (based on external form – cf. “handsomeness”) and mental (based on inner qualities and most importantly on virtue).

¹⁸ The derivation of the aesthetic terms *formosus* [beautiful] and *speciosus* [handsome] from *forma* [form] and *species* [appearance] is found in Augustine of Hippo, Ch. 18.

¹⁹ In a marginal comment, Malaspina quotes an analogical argument from Dickson: “This opinion of Linnaeus I shall reinforce with an observation of one of the greatest physiologists of Europe: that most animals in their wild state are of a dark colour, and that, when domesticated, they generally assume a lighter hue, and often become perfectly white. Of this we have very striking examples in the duck, the goose, the dunghill fowl, the pigeon, the turkey, the cat and others, perhaps, which may occur to gentlemen skilled in natural history. Let the apologists for slavery beware, lest they stir up naturalists to investigate this matter with redoubled ardour, for it seems not improbable, that the results of their inquiries may be that the negroes are the aborigines of mankind. Thus, perhaps this interesting problem may, one day, be completely solved. We may at last be able to account for the various colours of man in the old, as well as for their uniform complexion in the new hemisphere, and for its general resemblance to that of the Tartar hordes, for the dark complexion of the Samoyedes, and the clear brown of the Otaheitians.”

²⁰ In a marginal comment, Malaspina quotes from Jefferson 229: “And is this difference [of colours] of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour, in the one preferable to that eternal monotony which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race?”

²¹ It might be possible, though it is not clear that the Spanish can bear the interpretation, to take Malaspina’s “las mezclas” – “mixings” or “combinations” – as referring to the social rather than reproductive mixing of races. This may be more charitable, in so far as it may be more plausible for Malaspina to claim to have observed that when dark-skinned and light-skinned people live together it is by and large the dark-skinned who come to adopt the customs of the light-skinned. There could be an actual asymmetry here, one conditioned by specific social and political, as well as geographical, circumstances. Nevertheless, the reproductive reading seems preferable, in part because in all likelihood Malaspina would more readily view reproductive processes than social interactions as actions of Nature.

²² Malaspina quotes from Barthélemy, Ch. 54.

²³ The quotation is from Hume *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Section IX: Conclusion, Part I.

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