



## Contents

Introduction	v
Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis	1
To the Reader	3
PART ONE	5
PART TWO	85
<i>Note on the Text and Acknowledgements</i>	149
<i>Notes</i>	149
Extra Material	159
<i>Ugo Foscolo's Life and Works</i>	161
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	167



LAST LETTERS OF  
JACOPO ORTIS

*Naturæ clamat ab ipso vox tumulo.\**





## To the Reader

My intention, in publishing these letters, is to raise a monument to unknown virtue and to consecrate to the memory of my only friend those tears which now I am forbidden to shed upon his tomb. And you, gentle reader, if you are not one of those who demand from others that heroism of which they are themselves incapable, will, I hope, extend your compassion to this unhappy youth from whom you may perhaps take comfort and example.

LORENZO ALDERANI\*



# PART ONE





He comes in search of freedom, which is precious,  
As he must know who gave his life for it.\*

DANTE

FROM THE EUGANEAN HILLS,\* 11TH OCTOBER 1797

The sacrifice of our homeland is complete.\* All is lost, and life remains to us – if indeed we are allowed to live – only so that we may lament our misfortunes and our shame. My name is on the list of those proscribed, I know, but would you wish me to save myself from my oppressor by giving myself over to him who has betrayed me? Comfort my mother: overcome by her tears I have obeyed her, and I have left Venice in order to escape the first and most ferocious persecutions. And must I now forsake even this long-accustomed solitude of mine, where, without losing sight of my unhappy land, I may still hope for some days of peace? You make me shudder, Lorenzo. Just how many unfortunates are there? And even we Italians, alas, are washing our hands in Italian blood. I do not mind what happens to me: since I despair both of my homeland and of myself, I am waiting placidly for imprisonment and death. At least my dead body will not fall into the hands of strangers. My name will be quietly mourned by a few good men, the companions of our miseries, and my bones will rest in our ancestral earth.

13TH OCTOBER

I beg you, Lorenzo, to insist no more. I am determined not to leave these hills. It is true that I promised my mother I would take refuge in some other country, but I haven't the heart to do it, and she will forgive me, I hope. Is this life worth preserving by cowardice

and exile? Oh, how many of our fellow citizens will moan and groan and repent, far from their homes, the fact that they have done that! And what could we ourselves expect but penury and scorn – or at best some brief and fruitless compassion, the sole comfort which civilized nations afford to the alien refugee? And where should I look for shelter? In Italy, that prostituted country, always the victor's reward? Could I have before my eyes those who have despoiled, derided and sold us, and not weep for anger? To the ruin of whole peoples, they exploit what they call "liberty" as the popes exploited crusades. Ah, how often in despair of vengeance I feel like plunging a knife into my heart to pour out all my blood amid the last shrieks of my homeland!

And these others? They have bought our slavery, regaining with gold what they stupidly and cravenly lost in war. Truly I am like one of those wretches who, having been given out for dead, were buried alive, and then, coming round, found themselves in the tomb among shadows and skeletons, certain that they were living, but in despair of the pleasant light of day, and forced to die amid curses and hunger. Why let us see and experience liberty, and then take it back for ever, and so shamefully?

16TH OCTOBER

Enough of that – let us speak no more of it. The storm seems to have died down. If the danger returns, be assured, I shall try every means of escape. However, I am living peacefully, as peacefully as anyone can. I see no one at all – I am always wandering through the countryside. But, to tell you the truth, I think, and I am troubled. Send me some books.

How is Lauretta? Poor girl! When I left her she was beside herself. She is beautiful and still young, but her mind is unstable, and she is so sad at heart... I did not love her, but out of either pity or gratitude, if she had chosen me alone to comfort her, pouring into my ear all her soul and her weaknesses and her sufferings, I would indeed gladly have made her my lifelong companion. Fate did not wish it. Better so, perhaps. She loved Eugenio, and he died in her arms. Her father and her brothers have had to flee from their homeland, and that poor family, deprived of all human help, is

PART ONE

left to live, who can tell how, on tears. There, O Liberty, is another victim for you. Do you know that as I write to you, Lorenzo, I am weeping like a child? It is only too true! I have always become involved with bad people, and if occasionally I have met someone good, I have always had to feel sorry for him. Farewell, farewell.

18TH OCTOBER

Michele has brought me the Plutarch,\* for which I thank you. He told me you would send some more books on another occasion. I have enough for now. The divine Plutarch will console me for the crimes and miseries of humanity as I turn my eyes on the few illustrious men who, more or less pre-eminent among mankind, stand out from so many centuries and so many peoples. I do fear, however, that if they were stripped of their historical splendour and of our reverence for antiquity, there would not be much to boast about concerning the ancients or the moderns or myself. Ah, the human race!

23RD OCTOBER

If I can ever hope for peace, it is here, Lorenzo. The parish priest, the doctor and all the obscure mortals in this part of the world have known me since I was a child and are fond of me. Although I am living here as a fugitive, they all gather round me as though they wanted to tame a noble wild beast. For the moment I just let them get on with it. Admittedly I have not had such good treatment from human beings as to lead me to trust them straight away. But on the other hand, the tyrant's way of life, in fear and trembling of having his throat cut any minute, seems to me like the agony of a slow death, a shameful thing. At noon I sit with them under the plane tree by the church reading the lives of Lycurgus and Timoleon\* to them. On Sunday all the peasants crowded round me. Although they understood nothing at all, they listened to me open-mouthed. I believe that the wish to know and retell the history of past times stems from our self-love, which would like to be deceived and prolong our life by uniting it with people and things that are no more – making them, so to speak, our own property. The imagination loves to roam through the centuries

and possess another universe. With what emotion an old workman this morning told me about the lives of the priests of this parish in his childhood, and described to me the damage done by the storm of thirty-seven years ago, and the times of plenty, and the times of hunger. He wandered from the point every now and then, but always came back to it, and excused himself for his lapses! In this way I manage to forget that I am alive.

I have had a visit from Signor T—, whom you met in Padua. He told me that you often spoke to him about me, and that the day before yesterday you wrote to him about me. He too has taken refuge in the country to escape the initial fury of the mob, although to tell the truth he has not been much involved in public affairs. I had heard that he was an educated man of the highest probity – qualities which used to be respected, but cannot now be possessed with impunity. He is courteous, has an open countenance and speaks from the heart. There was someone with him, his daughter's fiancé, I think. No doubt he is a fine young man, but his face tells me nothing. Goodnight.

24TH OCTOBER

I have at last caught by the scruff of the neck that rogue of a peasant boy who was destroying our kitchen garden, cutting and breaking everything that he could not steal. He was up a peach tree, while I was in a pergola. He was happily breaking off the branches that were still green, because there was no more fruit on them. As soon as I had him in my clutches, he began to cry out for mercy. He confessed to me that for weeks he had been engaged in that wicked business because the gardener's brother had some months previously stolen a sack of broad beans from his father. "And your father teaches you to steal?" "Truly, sir, everyone does it." I let him go, and jumping over a hedge I cried out, "That is society in miniature: they are all like that."

26TH OCTOBER

I have seen her, Lorenzo, "the divine maiden", and I thank you for it. I found her seated, painting a miniature of herself. She rose to her feet, greeting me as though she knew me, and told a servant

to go and look for her father. "He did not dare to hope you would come," she told me. "He is probably in the fields. It won't be long before he returns." A little girl was running round her knees, saying I don't know what in her ear. Teresa said to her, "This is a friend of Lorenzo. It was he whom Daddy went to see the day before yesterday." In the meantime Signor T— had returned. He greeted me with familiarity, thanking me for remembering him. Teresa meanwhile, taking her little sister by the hand, went away. "Look," he said to me, pointing to his daughters as they were leaving the room, "that is all there is of us." He ventured these words, it seemed to me, as if he wanted to let me know that his wife was not there. He did not mention her. We chatted for a good while. When I was about to leave, Teresa came back. "We are not so very far away," she said to me. "Come and spend some evenings with us."

I went home with my heart full of joy. What can I say? Is the sight of beauty enough to lay to rest all the sufferings of us sad mortals? You see there is a wellspring of life in me. Certainly the only one – and, who knows, perhaps a fatal one. But if my soul is predestined to be perpetually in a storm, does it matter?

28TH OCTOBER

Please be silent, please be silent. There are days when I cannot trust myself: a demon burns me, shakes me, consumes me. Perhaps I have a high opinion of myself, but it seems to me impossible that our homeland should be so oppressed while we are still living. What are we doing all this time living among regrets? In short, I beg you not to speak to me about it any more. When you tell me of our sufferings, which are so many, are you perhaps reproaching me for staying here in indolence? And do you not realize that you are torturing me with a thousand torments? Oh, if there were only one tyrant, and the slaves were less stupid, my right hand would suffice. But he who blames me now for cowardice would accuse me then of a crime. And the wise man himself would pity in me not the prudence of the strong man, but the frenzy of the madman. What action would you suggest taking, caught between two powerful nations which – inveterate, sworn, ferocious enemies of each

other – unite only in order to throw us into chains? And where their strength is not enough, one deceives us with enthusiasm for liberty, the other with religious fanaticism. And all of us, cowardly slaves ruined by ancient servitude and recent licentiousness, moan and groan, betrayed and starving and never provoked either by betrayal or starvation. Ah, if I could, I would bury my home, my dearest friends, and myself, in order to leave nothing, nothing to make those nations proud of their omnipotence and my servitude! There were races once who, rather than obey the Romans, the world's brigands, gave to the flames their homes, their wives, their children and themselves, burying their sacred independence among the glorious ruins and ashes of their homeland.

## 1ST NOVEMBER

I am well. I am well for the time being, like an invalid who is asleep and does not feel his pain, and whole days pass by in the house of Signor T—, who loves me like a dear son. I let myself be beguiled, and the apparent happiness of that family seems to me to be real, and to be mine also. If only that fiancé did not exist! Because in fact... I hate no one in the world, but there are certain men whom I want only to see from a distance. His future father-in-law came to me yesterday evening singing his praises as though he were writing a letter of introduction: *good... correct... patient!* And was there nothing else he could say? Even if he possessed those virtues to a degree of angelic perfection, with that heart which is always so dead, and that masterful face never animated either by a smile of pleasure or by the gentle silence of compassion, he would be for me like one of those rose bushes with no flowers which make me fear the thorns. What is a man if he is given over to cold, calculating reason? Wicked, and wicked in a contemptible way. On the other hand, Odoardo knows something of music, he plays a good game of chess, he eats, he reads, he sleeps, he walks – and all as if by clockwork. And he never speaks emphatically, except to extol, as he does continually, his sumptuous, select library. But when he goes on repeating, in that pedantic voice of his, *sumptuous and select*, I feel ready to give him the lie outright. If all the ravings of mankind which under the name of *science* or *learning* have been

written down and printed in every age and by every race were reduced to a thousand volumes at most, it seems to me that we presumptuous mortals would have no reason to complain. Let's have an end to all these discourses.

Meanwhile, I have started to educate Teresa's little sister. I am teaching her to read and to write. When I am with her, my face brightens up – my heart is more joyful than it has ever been, and I play a thousand boyish pranks. I don't know why, but children always like me. And that little girl really is sweet! With her curly blonde hair, her blue eyes, her rosy cheeks, fresh, innocent and chubby, she looks, for all her four years, like one of the three Graces.\* If you saw her run to me, grasp my knees, run away to make me follow her, deny me a kiss and then suddenly put those little lips to mine! Today I was at the top of a tree gathering fruit: that dear creature held out her arms and stammered, "Please don't fall."

What a beautiful autumn! Goodbye, Plutarch! He stays under my arm, unopened. For three days I spent the morning filling a basket with grapes and peaches, which I covered with leaves. I followed the course of the brook, and when I got to the house, I roused the whole household by singing the harvest song.

## 12TH NOVEMBER

Yesterday, which was a holiday, we ceremonially transplanted the pines from the nearby hillock to the hill opposite the church. My father likewise tried to make that small hill fertile, but the cypresses which he put there have never managed to flourish, and the pines are still young. Helped by a few workmen, I crowned the summit, down which the water tumbles, with five poplars, thus shading the eastern side with a dense grove which will be the first thing to be greeted by the sun when he appears in his splendour at the crest of the mountains. And in fact yesterday the sun, brighter than usual, warmed the air up again, chilled as it was by the mist of the dying autumn. At noon the peasant girls came in their holiday smocks, enlivening the games and dances with their songs and toasts. One was the bride, one the little daughter, and another the sweetheart of one of the workmen. And you know that our peasants have



## EVERGREENS SERIES

### Beautifully produced classics, affordably priced

Alma Classics is committed to making available a wide range of literature from around the globe. Most of the titles are enriched by an extensive critical apparatus, notes and extra reading material, as well as a selection of photographs. The texts are based on the most authoritative editions and edited using a fresh, accessible editorial approach. With an emphasis on production, editorial and typographical values, Alma Classics aspires to revitalize the whole experience of reading classics.



For our complete list and latest offers visit

[almabooks.com/evergreens](http://almabooks.com/evergreens)