

1. NORMAN DOUGLAS: AN ALBANIAN SEER

Norman Douglas (Falkenhorst, Austria, 1868 – Capri, Italia, 1952). Scrittore inglese. Pur essendo di madrelingua tedesca, apprese molto presto l'inglese come seconda lingua. Dopo una non felice esperienza in una scuola di Uppingham, frequentò il ginnasio a Karlsruhe, dove apprese l'italiano, la letteratura classica e il pianoforte. Disponendo di un buon capitale finanziario decise di intraprendere l'attività diplomatica, come segretario d'ambasciata a Pietroburgo (1894-96). Ma non avendo subito fortuna, decise di demordere. Stabilitosi in Italia, nell'isola di Capri, vi ambientò il più noto dei suoi romanzi, Vento del Sud (South wind, 1917), a cui seguirono Essi andarono (They went, 1920) e Al principio (In the beginning, 1927). All'Italia è dedicata anche la sua opera più rilevante, Calabria antica (Old Calabria, 1915), un saggio erudito e informativo, con annotazioni di viaggio e spunti autobiografici. Nel 1946 decise di stabilirsi definitivamente a Capri, dove ricevette la cittadinanza onoraria e dove riposa. Da "Old Calabria" presentiamo il capitolo riguardante Makij

Sometimes I find my way to the village of Macchia, distant about three miles from San Demetrio. It is a dilapidated but picturesque cluster of houses, situate on a projecting tongue of land which is terminated by a little chapel to Saint Elias, the old sun-god Helios, lover of peaks and promontories, whom in his Christian shape the rude Albanian colonists brought hither from their fatherland, even as, centuries before, he had accompanied the Byzantines on the same voyage and, fifteen centuries yet earlier, the Greeks.



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At Macchia was born, in 1814, of an old and relatively wealthy family, Girolamo de Rada, [Footnote: Thus his friend and compatriot, Dr. Michele Marchiano, spells the name in a biography which I recommend to those who think there is no intellectual movement in South Italy. But he himself, at the very close of his life, in 1902, signs himself Ger. de Rhada. So this village of Macchia is spelt indifferently by Albanians as Maki or Makji. They have a fine

Elizabethan contempt for orthography—as well they may have, with their thirty alphabets.] a flame-like patriot in whom the tempestuous aspirations of modern Albania took shape. The ideal pursued during his long life was the regeneration of his country; and if the attention of international congresses and linguists and folklorists is now drawn to this little corner of the earth—if, in 1902, twenty-one newspapers were devoted to the Albanian cause (eighteen in Italy alone, and one even in London)—it was wholly his merit.

He was the son of a Greco-Catholic priest. After a stern religious upbringing under the paternal roof at Macchia and in the college of San Demetrio, he was sent to Naples to complete his education. It is characteristic of the man that even in the heyday of youth he cared little for modern literature and speculations and all that makes for exact knowledge, and that he fled from his Latin teacher, the celebrated Puoti, on account of his somewhat exclusive love of grammatical rules. None the less, though congenitally averse to the materialistic and subversive theories that were then seething in Naples, he became entangled in the anti-Bourbon movements of the late thirties, and narrowly avoided the death-penalty which struck down some of his comrades. At other times his natural piety laid him open to the accusation of reactionary monarchical leanings. He attributed his escape from this and every other peril to the hand of God. Throughout life he was a zealous reader of the Bible, a firm and even ascetic believer, forever preoccupied, in childlike simplicity of soul, with first causes. His spirit moved majestically in a world of fervent platitudes. The whole Cosmos lay serenely distended before his mental vision; a benevolent God overhead, devising plans for the prosperity of Albania; a malignant, ubiquitous and very real devil, thwarting these His good intentions whenever possible; mankind on earth, sowing and reaping in the sweat of their brow, as was ordained of old. Like many poets, he never disabused his mind of this comfortable form of anthropomorphism. He was a firm believer, too, in dreams. But his guiding motive, his sun by day and star by night, was a belief in the "mission" of the Pelasgian race now scattered about the shores of the Inland Sea—in Italy, Sicily, Greece, Dalmatia, Roumania, Asia Minor, Egypt—a belief as ardent and irresponsible as that which animates the *Lost Tribe* enthusiasts of England. He considered that the world hardly realized how much it owed to his countryfolk; according to his views, Achilles, Philip of Macedon, Alexander the Great, Aristotle, Pyrrhus, Diocletian, Julian the Apostate—they were all Albanians. Yet even towards the end of his life he is obliged to confess:—

"But the evil demon who for over four thousand years has been hindering the Pelasgian race from collecting itself into one state, is still endeavouring by insidious means to thwart the work which would lead it to that union."

Disgusted with the clamorous and intriguing bustle of Naples, he retired, at the early age of 34, to his natal village of Macchia, throwing over one or two offers of lucrative worldly appointments. He describes himself as wholly disenchanted with the "facile fatuity" of Liberalism, the fact being, that he lacked what a French psychologist has called the *function of the real*; his temperament was not of the kind to cope with actualities. This retirement is an epoch in his life—it is the Grand Renunciation. Henceforward he loses personal touch with thinking humanity. At Macchia he remained, brooding on Albanian wrongs, devising remedies, corresponding with foreigners and writing—ever writing; consuming his patrimony in the cause of Albania, till the direst poverty dogged his footsteps. I have read some of his Italian works. They are curiously oracular, like the whisperings of those fabled Dodonian oaks of his fatherland; they heave with a darkly-virile mysticism. He shares Blake's ruggedness, his torrential and confused utterance, his benevolence, his flashes of luminous inspiration, his moral background. He resembles that visionary in another aspect: he was a consistent and passionate adorer of the *Ewig-weibliche*. Some of the female characters in his poems retain their dewy freshness, their exquisite originality, even after passing through the translator's crucible.

At the age of 19 he wrote a poem on "Odysseus," which was published under a pseudonym. Then, three years later, there appeared a collection of rhapsodies entitled "Milosao," which he had garnered from the lips of Albanian village maidens. It is his best-known work, and has been translated into Italian more than once. After his return to Macchia followed some years of

apparent sterility, but later on, and especially during the last twenty years of his life, his literary activity became prodigious. Journalism, folklore, poetry, history, grammar, philology, ethnology, aesthetics, politics, morals—nothing came amiss to his gifted pen, and he was fruitful, say his admirers, even in his errors. Like other men inflamed with one single idea, he boldly ventured into domains of thought where specialists fear to tread. His biographer enumerates forty-three different works from his pen. They all throb with a resonant note of patriotism; they are “fragments of a heart,” and indeed, it has been said of him that he utilized even the grave science of grammar as a battlefield whereon to defy the enemies of Albania. But perhaps he worked most successfully as a journalist. His “Fiamuri Arberit” (the Banner of Albania) became the rallying cry of his countrymen in every corner of the earth.

These multifarious writings—and doubtless the novelty of his central theme—attracted the notice of German philologists and linguists, of all lovers of freedom, folklore and verse. Leading Italian writers like Cantu praised him highly; Lamartine, in 1844, wrote to him: “Je suis bien-heureux de ce signe de fraternité poétique et politique entre vous et moi. La poésie est venue de vos rivages et doit y retourner. . . .” Hermann Buchholtz discovers scenic changes worthy of Shakespeare, and passages of Aeschylean grandeur, in his tragedy “Sofonisba.” Carnet compares him with Dante, and the omniscient Mr. Gladstone wrote in 1880—a post card, presumably—belauding his disinterested efforts on behalf of his country. He was made the subject of many articles and pamphlets, and with reason. Up to his time, Albania had been a myth. He it was who divined the relationship between the Albanian and Pelasgian tongues; who created the literary language of his country, and formulated its political ambitions.

Whereas the hazy “Autobiologia” records complicated political intrigues at Naples that are not connected with his chief strivings, the little “Testamento politico,” printed towards the end of his life, is more interesting. It enunciates his favourite and rather surprising theory that the Albanians cannot look for help and sympathy save only to their *brothers*, the Turks. Unlike many Albanians on either side of the Adriatic, he was a pronounced Turco-phile, detesting the “stolid perfidy” and “arrogant disloyalty” of the Greeks. Of Austria, the most insidious enemy of his country’s freedom, he seems to have thought well. A year before his death he wrote to an Italian translator of “Milosao” (I will leave the passage in the original, to show his cloudy language):

“Ed un tempo propizio la accompagna: la ricostituzione dell’ Epiro nei suoi quattro vilayet autonomi quale e nei propri consigli e nei propri desideri; ricostituzione, che pel suo Giornale, quello dell’ ottimo A. Lorecchio—cui precede il principe Nazionale Kastrioti, Chini—si annuncia fatale, e quasi fulcro della stabilita dello impero Ottomano, a della pace Europea; preludio di quella diffusione del regno di Dio sulla terra, che sara la Pace tra gli Uomini.” Truly a remarkable utterance, and one that illustrates the disadvantages of living at a distance from the centres of thought. Had he travelled less with the spirit and more with the body, his opinions might have been modified and corrected. But he did not even visit the Albanian colonies in Italy and Sicily. Hence that vast confidence in his mission—a confidence born of solitude, intellectual and geographical. Hence that ultra-terrestrial yearning which tinges his apparently practical aspirations.

He remained at home, ever poor and industrious; wrapped in bland exaltation and oblivious to contemporary movements of the human mind. Not that his existence was without external activities. A chair of Albanian literature at San Demetrio, instituted in 1849 but suppressed after three years, was conferred on him in 1892 by the historian and minister Pasquale Villari; for a considerable time, too, he was director of the communal school at Corigliano, where, with characteristic energy, he set up a printing press; violent journalistic campaigns succeeded one another; in 1896 he arranged for the first congress of Albanian language in that town, which brought together delegates from every part of Italy and elicited a warm telegram of felicitation from the minister Francesco Crispi, himself an Albanian. Again, in 1899, we find him reading a paper before the twelfth international congress of Orientalists at Rome. But best of all, he loved the seclusion of Macchia.

Griefs clustered thickly about the closing years of this unworldly dreamer. Blow succeeded blow. One by one, his friends dropped off; his brothers, his beloved wife, his four sons—he

survived them all; he stood alone at last, a stricken figure, in tragic and sublime isolation. Over eighty years old, he crawled thrice a week to deliver his lectures at San Demetrio; he still cultivated a small patch of ground with enfeebled arm, composing, for relaxation, poems and rhapsodies at the patriarchal age of 88! They will show you the trees under which he was wont to rest, the sunny views he loved, the very stones on which he sat; they will tell you anecdotes of his poverty—of an indigence such as we can scarcely credit. During the last months he was often thankful for a crust of bread, in exchange for which he would bring a sack of acorns, self-collected, to feed the giver's pigs. Destitution of this kind, brought about by unswerving loyalty to an ideal, ceases to exist in its sordid manifestations: it exalts the sufferer. And his life's work is there. Hitherto there had been no "Albanian Question" to perplex the chanceries of Europe. He applied the match to the tinder; he conjured up that phantom which refuses to be laid.

He died, in 1903, at San Demetrio; and there lies entombed in the cemetery on the hill-side, among the oaks. But you will not easily find his grave.

His biographer indulges a poetic fancy in sketching the fair monument which a grateful country will presently rear to his memory on the snowy Acroceraunian heights. It might be well, meanwhile, if some simple commemorative stone were placed on the spot where he lies buried. Had he succumbed at his natal Macchia, this would have been done; but death overtook him in the alien parish of San Demetrio, and his remains were mingled with those of its poorest citizens. A microcosmic illustration of that clannish spirit of Albania which he had spent a lifetime in endeavouring to direct to nobler ends! He was the Mazzini of his nation. A Garibaldi, when the crisis comes, may possibly emerge from that tumultuous horde. Where is the Cavour?





