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Italy in 1914: Thomas Nelson Page's View of the Country at the Outset of WWI

"The People of Italy in the Summer of 1914 had no dream of war. They made it plain in various ways. They wanted peace and release from the exactions of military service." Thus, in his book on Italy from Unification to World War I, Ambassador Thomas Nelson Page summarized the mood of Italians at the outset of the Great War (145). However, while the book came out in 1920, shortly after the end of the conflict, in August 1914 the intellectual turned diplomat gave an interesting and detailed account of what was happening in Italy after military operations had begun in Europe, and of the most urgent measures he had to take in his capacity as American representative in Rome. Although Italy had remained neutral, Page sensed the flimsiness of the moment and reported about the emergency measures taken by the government.

A Southern gentleman from Virginia, the son of John Page and Elizabeth Burwell Nelson, both descendants of the "landed aristocracy" who had inherited the landholding of Rosewell after having lost most of their property in the Civil War and Reconstruction, Page remained true to the values of his family and of the old South. By the end of the nineteenth century, he had become one of the South's most celebrated writers. Most of his literary work, especially the collection of short stories *Ole' Virginia* (1887), was dedicated to an idealized depiction of a noble and tranquil Antebellum South. His affectionate view of Southern people before the war and his depiction of African-American slaves as contented and innocent people was part of a Southern genre at the turn of the century. Critics agree that Page's work is an excellent example of a common trend in the South of the United States in the decades following the defeat in the Civil War, but especially the humiliation of radical Reconstruction. Although a major personality in his days, so much as to be praised by President Wilson as "a national

ornament," Page does not belong in the pantheon of American literature (Abbott 83).

Ignored by national surveys and anthologies, the Virginian writer appears in a prominent way in several anthologies on the Literature of the American South and especially in *The Companion to Southern Literature*, in which he is defined as having established a reputation as "a plantation romancer" (390). His first works resented the North and the defeat suffered, but, especially at the beginning of the new century, he progressively turned to a "mellow" and "nostalgic" mood of old Southern ways. His stories managed to win him the sympathy of Northern readers who found a novel exoticism in the settings and the stories of the Antebellum South. However, Page remained a "conventional" writer of the South and a racist who saw it difficult to welcome the "negroes" in a society dominated by a superior race. Some of his stories and articles from the beginning of the twentieth century, when he had already become a popular writer, were still permeated by an ebullient racism which led him to justify to an extent the lynching of supposed black rapists (Brundage 58).

Page made a name for himself also as a diplomat and, for our purposes, especially as Woodrow Wilson's ambassador to Italy for a long service (1913-1919). He was thus able to watch closely the position of Italy during WWI and to describe it both in his correspondence and, shortly after, in an analysis and memoir entitled *Italy and the World War* (1920). Page's sympathy for Italy comes out from the book as it does in the letter that follows this essay. The book is an elaborate reflection on the history of the country and attempts to justify Italy's intervention in the war in 1915.

The letter presented here is instead an impromptu reaction to world events at the time the tragedy of World War I was unfolding. Page writes to his beloved brother Rosewell who was in charge of managing the family assets. Therefore, the tone of the letter is personal, but at the same time it gives a general political appraisal of the position of Italy at the outbreak of the war, of the situation at the American embassy in the tense days of the summer of 1914, and of the emergency of repatriating American citizens in a time of crisis. Yet the author does not forget the most immediate needs of the family, the selling of produce and the payments to be made, while interposing them with comments on the profits trade could bring to

America in a difficult time. Although imbued with the characteristic dramatic tone of his prose, rich in sensitive appreciation for the people ready to help Americans in need (here the parallel between the Italian hotelkeepers and merchants, and African-American servants comes to mind), the letter is an excellent instrument to understand at the same time the atmosphere reigning over Europe and the concerns of an American upper class family residing in a continent at war.

Page is well aware of the import of the tragic event: "It is a most terrible war that it is possible to conceive of, and nothing like it has ever occurred; not even the Napoleonic wars covered so vast a field and constituted a universal cloud of danger." Heads of state had precipitated into the conflict almost without realizing it, as confirmed by historians who have analyzed the causes of World War I. They were as "sleepwalkers," comments Christopher Clark in his 2012 book of worldwide success, and resumed their summer holidays as usual, after the first shock of the Austrian ultimatum had passed (Joll 256). But by August, although many in Europe and in the Western world still believed it would be a brief war, it was clear that the conflict was bound to continue for a long time. Thomas Nelson Page seemed aware of this risk, and his letter testifies to his perceptive nature.

Page was representative of that blend between the first American diplomats in Italy, usually artists or intellectuals with a keen cultural interest in the peninsula, and the ones of the twentieth century, professional politicians versed in international affairs. President Theodore Roosevelt had been the first to send career diplomats to Italy, but the choice made by Wilson was in a way a political decision in itself. The Virginia born president, in fact, appointed Page in the attempt at preserving the support of Virginia senators who were demanding a more prominent role for their state in the administration. In the end, the mission of the Southern writer turned out to be an asset for the United States, especially when war began. Cautious in his decisions and sympathetic toward the host country, Page befriended many Italian leaders, mostly aristocrats, and felt at ease in the salons of the nobility with whom he possibly found an affinity. While in Rome he also kept a correspondence with another ambassador Page, Walter Hines stationed in London, who was the strategist of American "British-friendly" neutrality in the first years of the war.

He travelled to Europe with his second wife Florence Lathrope Field, "a woman who ranked among America's urban elite and one for whom travel was a way of life" (Funigiello 3). She left an impressive bulk of letters that are now preserved in the Thomas N. Page collection. Her accounts, especially the ones addressed to her daughters Minna and Florence (mentioned also in this letter), give an insight of Europe in the years of war that compare to her husband's; but this is matter for another essay.

Thomas Nelson Page's official and private correspondence is voluminous and indicative of an intense and active public life. However, the letter here transcribed allows the reader to see beyond the public official that he was, and it offers an unusual view of the transatlantic world at the outset of World War I.

The letter, addressed to his brother Rosewell Page, and dated August 27th, 1914, is printed by permission of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Duke University, and is contained in the collection "Thomas Nelson Page papers, 1739-1927 and undated bulk, 1885-1920," box 9, 1913-15.

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