

STORIA DI CRISTO

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I

THOUGH still a young man—he is only forty-one years of age—Giovanni Papini is, at the present moment, perhaps the most interesting figure in European letters. In poetry, prose fiction, criticism, philosophy, polemics, he has a long list of works to his credit. Prezzolino's bibliography covers forty-five pages. Then, after establishing one reputation, he has turned his back upon it, given it the lie, and has swiftly built up another of the very opposite kind. After writing many little things, he has produced a great work, a master-piece. Even as a popular success, it surpasses all else that has come from his pen. Though not yet translated, it is being read all over Europe. An English version is promised for this autumn by Hodder and Stoughton. When it is made accessible to the English-speaking world, it will excite no ordinary interest; for the problem of any complete reversal of mental attitude is absorbing, and this *volte-face* has peculiar significance. Even if a satisfactory forthcoming solution cannot be found, the problem is well worth stating and examining.

Materials for a complete study of Papini are lacking, as his works are not easily obtainable on this side of the Atlantic. The present article is necessarily partial because it is based on only six of his books, *Ventiquattro Cervelli*, *Stroncature*, *Maschilla*, *Le Memorie d' Iddio*, *Vita di Nessuno*, and *Storia di Cristo*. The *Discorso su Giovanni Papini* by his friend and critic Giuseppe Prezzolino has been of great service. Some half-dozen brief articles have appeared in American journals: *Stroncature* was reviewed in "The Standard" of September 3, 1921. Scanty as this material is, it may still be trusted to represent the author truly. Conclusions based upon it may be accepted at least provisionally.

In the private life of a successful author the public takes a legitimate interest, because of the sympathy assumed to exist between the man and his work. All the information Prezzolino vouchsafes is that Papini is a Florentine "with a childhood withered among books, a youth sterilized in tentatives of action." He is the sort of precocious genius who would read a whole library, like the

boy Coleridge, and would attempt to write an encyclopaedia by himself. One gathers that he is married and has children. At one stage of his development he read philosophy prodigiously with the pathetic hope of finding there the key to truth.

From the two photographs and the caricature in Prezzolino's *Discorso* more can be learnt, for the face is the index of character. Papini has jested upon his personal appearance; he is, in truth, a notoriously ugly man. The mouth is almost as deformed as Arnold Bennett's; the teeth protrude; the mouth will not shut; the eyes behind glasses do not seem to see; the hair is a ruffled mane as flamboyant as Chesterton's. It is a plebeian face, the face of a street arab, the Gavroche of literature. Soffici's caricature must have been easy to draw. It portrays a mask without humour, without tolerance, alert, challenging, sardonic.

The expression tells the truth; for Papini is a devastating critic, a duellist of the pen. *Ventiquattro Cervelli* (Twenty-four Brains) is a collection of critical articles written between 1902, the beginning of his career, and 1912. Its popularity may be gauged by the fact that it has gone into a fifth edition. The Italians must be fonder of reading essays than we are. Though not so characteristic as his later work, these reviews display Papini's peculiar fire, rapidity and clarity of style, and his remarkable powers of exposition. Few writers rival his ability in laying bare the bases of a philosophical position, or fixing in firm, bold outline the leading ideas of a book or an author. The breadth of his reading, the certainty of his erudition, the range of his intellectual curiosity are evident on every page. With equal ease, he can appreciate Berkeley, "the great and good Bishop Barkley," as Young called him, and Carlo Michelstaedter the young Austrian philosopher who, with all his life before him and with everything to live for, committed suicide, in order to conform with the tenets of his philosophy. Philosophers are the chief game he flies at. Croce, Bergson, Locke, Hegel, Eucken, Spencer, Schiller are put each in his place. A characteristic judgment is his summation of Herbert Spencer as "a *petit bourgeois* without courage or boldness. . . . floating in the limbo of antinomies, oscillating between the necessity of command and the lamentation of the oppressed. He was the pedantic Hamlet of the semi-intelligent, compromising *bourgeoisie*." In Locke he finds passivity, cowardliness, timidity, poverty and narrowness of spirit, and the belief that common sense and the instinct of distress are the inspirers and producers of our science and philosophy. But Papini's criticism is not all destructive. He admires great Italians, Dante, Leonardo, Alberti; he pays affectionate tribute to his friend Vailati;

he recognizes the merits of writers so alien to the genius of Italy as Tolstoi, Dostoievski, and Walt Whitman.

Far more combative and characteristic is *Stroncature*, which appeared in 1916 and reached its fifth edition in 1920. "Beheadings" may serve as the English equivalent; but perhaps "Mutilations", "Scalpings", or "Vivisections" would be nearer the mark. Papini himself considers it a better book than *Ventiquattro Cervelli*, and says so in his preface. In these pages he runs amuck, like a mad Malay with a pen for a kris, but far surer of his aim, and far deadlier in his thrusts. His victims are stabbed, or slashed, or suffer the Chinese punishment known as ling-chi, cut into a thousand pieces. He is possessed by the *furia italiana*. He rages against local deities like Croce and D'Annunzio, masterpieces accepted by the world like *Hamlet* and *Faust*, the popular craze for anniversary celebrations, the cocksure younger generation, with whom wisdom will undoubtedly die. Prezzolino says that the Italian public admire these slashing attacks just as spectators admire deft carte and tierce in the fencing-schools. Papini can damn a reputation with an adjective or a contemptuous phrase. Kant is an honest, steady bourgeois; Hegel is a romantic who tries to escape from romanticism; Schopenhauer wrote the great opera-bouffe of German philosophy, Herbert Spencer was a civil engineer out of a job, who wrote philosophy. *Stroncature* is an exhilarating book, like Chesterton's far better tempered *Heretics*. The reader laughs with sheer intellectual pleasure at the brilliance and audacity of the attack, one bonny fighter against a crowd, and he shares the swordsman's delight of battle. At the same time it is to be noted that Papini, even in this volume, can praise as well as blame. He admires Swift, with whom he has more than one point of contact, and reveals, with intense sympathy, the effort of Miguel da Unamuno to revive the spiritual life of Spain.

Maschitta (Manhood) is a series of brief appeals to the young manhood of Italy. They may be described as written harangues urging revolt. Perhaps the most characteristic is the "March of Courage." It contains such sentences as this:—"He who lacks courage will never escape from the Italian, French, English, German, American, Russian,—but above all the Italian—clogging filth, which makes our steps circumspect and slow." Papini's programme of reform is suggested in these:—"We shall smash the old philosophic, literary, pictorial, musical forms only by dint of courage. We shall purge our blood from all the toxins of culture, of imitation, of admiration only by dint of courage." Characteristic sarcasms mark the end of the section, "We the Injurers":—

Who will not be persuaded by these counsels full of what the author of *Fioretti* calls "dove-like simplicity."? I am the very first to confess myself overcome,—penitent,—contrite, and I promise never to do as heretofore. From now on, I will never again speak the truth, for truth is calumny. I will never again criticize anyone, for criticism is brazen intrusion into other people's affairs; I will never again say what I think, for sincerity trails into insult; I will never again engage in controversy, for controversies are only quarrels of prejudiced persons. I will no longer speak against all persons, but against all words: bread I will no longer call bread, but "doughiness"; the ass I will no longer call ass, but "animal necessary to humanity"; dirt I will no longer call dirt but assuredly "mother of cabbages." And I hope that then the journalistic and philosophical toadery of Italy will swallow down their slobber and keep in their holes, because if this our miraculous conversion does not suffice, it will really be necessary to stone them without remorse or pity.

What effect such appeals had on the youth of Italy I cannot say. *Maschitta* has reached its third edition. To the cold northern temperament, unaware of the provocation and the conditions, most of the book seems shrill, if not hysterical.

Le Memorie d'Iddio (God's Memoirs) appeared in 1911, the third edition in 1919. It is "The Necessity of Atheism" gloomily elaborated into a Confession of Faith, a thoroughly inconsistent creed of negation. Beside these "Memoirs," Shelley's schoolboy essay is a squib in a forest fire. It may be called the last word in blasphemy; and it is thoroughly in accord with Papini's public declaration in the Costanza Theatre of Rome on February 21, 1913, that "in order to reach his powers man must throw off religious faith, not merely Christianity or Catholicism, but all mystic, spiritualistic, theosophic faiths and beliefs." Deity is represented as confessing its sins, the greatest being the creation of this world, and the race of man. The usual philosophical religious arguments, such as that it was necessary for God to create a universe in order to manifest Himself, are solemnly travestied: "It pleased me—I repeat it with horror—to prove my power which should render the invisible, visible; the intangible, tangible; and the abstract, concrete. I desired to measure the extent of my power, to materialize my imaginings, and to spread over the nakedness of my unique and simple spirit the many-colored stuff of changing reality." The author testifies against every theory of Revelation. God never sent seer or prophet, messenger or ambassador. Whoever has proclaimed himself the sent of God lied, in order to aggrandize himself and is self-deceived before deceiving others. The story of Christ is false, like all the rest.

The concluding paragraph runs thus:—"Men, become atheists

all! Make yourselves atheists at once! God himself, your God, God your son, begs it of you with all his soul. Ye men, who know the repose of surcease, deny it not to him, who has seen too much and is weary, and upon him to whom without being asked ye owe Life, do not, now that he requests it, refuse the gift of Death."

Pessimism, it has often been noted, is the lot of intellectual Europe. The armies of university men in every country of the old world are without hope, without belief, without joy. With them thought has become a virulent disease. Its ultimate expression is the counsel of Job's wife, "Curse God and die." The logic is inevitable. What afflicts one most in reading *Le Memorie d' Iddio* is not the wild whirling words, but the blank despair from which they issue, "the fixed, starless, Tartarean black." The words measure the misery of the soul that flings them in its Maker's face.

It is hard to make the theme of *Vita di Nessuno* (Life of Nobody) clear to English readers in language an English journal would print. "Adventures of an Atom" shadows it forth. It is—biological, and might have been written by a Yahoo, if Yahoos had learned Italian and taken to literature.

From this cursory examination of representative works, it is perhaps clear why Papini has been called the Italian Bernard Shaw. Both are universal critics, redoubted swordsmen of letters, as prompt to quarrel as Mercutio, skilled in fence, deadly in attack, with hand always on hilt, eager for any opponent, fearless of any odds. But the Italian is fiercer and gloomier, more akin to Swift and Carlyle in his loathing of mankind. Moreover, as Chesterton points out, there is in the Irishman a wild, racial chastity. Treating the theme of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Papini would produce far different effects. He is afflicted with Latin "naturalism", which English "prudery" and English "hypocrisy" have banned ever since the comic dramatists of the Restoration ceased to be comic. Only in the elder satirists and playwrights is found similar license of speech and concept. It is safe to predict that Papini will never be translated literally and completely into English.

II

Now this profound student of all philosophies and all literatures, this devastating critic, this embittered pessimist, this prophet of atheism, this master of flouts and jeers, has written a Life of Christ. Two facts are at once apparent; it is bulky, consisting of more than 650 pages, and it is popular, forty thousand copies having been printed. For the student of literature, if not of religion, the prob-

lem is—why and how was this book written? A further problem is to account for its popularity.

The reviewer of the *Times Literary Supplement* explains its origin. Sick of the city and disgusted with the fruitless activity of mankind, Papini fled to the hills between Arno and Tiber. There he found a simple peasantry, naturally kind and courteous, following the rites of Rome in marrying, christening their children, burying their dead, but utterly ignorant of the Scriptures, the foundation of their traditional faith. He began to read the Gospels to them, as stories. They were charmed, and the reader too felt the spell. He underwent a change of mental attitude, a change of heart, or conversion, as religious persons call it, which finds expression in this "story" of Christ.

It begins with a preface of twenty-two pages, and it ends with a prayer. No one can read either without thinking—the writer is a countryman of Savonarola and S. Francis of Assisi. The preface is as fierce and uncompromising polemic as Papini ever penned. Thus he opens fire: "For five hundred years those who style themselves "emancipated", because they have deserted the Army for the Dungeons, have been raging to assassinate Jesus a second time. To kill him in the hearts of men." The sceptics, the rationalists, the higher critics, the modernists are faithfully dealt with. The most logical conclusion to be drawn from all their fuss and chatter is that Jesus never came to earth at all, and even if He did, nothing can be certainly known of Him. "Advanced" preachers and professors of theology have run up the white flag over the citadel they were bound to defend to the last, just before the unexpected reinforcements marched in.

Papini takes his stand squarely on the three Synoptics; he accepts them literally, miracles and all. Whoever accepts the Gospels must accept them in their entirety, word for word, or else refute them from first to last, and say "We know nothing." Nothing can be more beautiful than the simplicity of the story they tell. No art can surpass their divine artlessness. But they are not read. The many orthodox "Lives" of Christ are unctuous and ill-written. The only "Life" read by enlightened Europeans is that of "the clerical apostate" Renan; and he offends every true Christian, outraging even by his praise, and every true historian by his compromises and his critical inadequacy. Theology Papini leaves at one side. He has drawn near to Jesus with the simplicity of love and desire, as the fishermen of Capernaum drew near to Him when He spoke. The author does not write for those within the household of faith, but for those outside. As a Florentine, he is proud to remember

that the Florentines are the only people who ever formally accepted Christ as their king. Savonarola had the idea in 1495, but it came into effect during the menace of a siege in 1527. On the great gate of the Palazzo Vecchio, which opens between Michael Angelo's David and Bandinelli's Hercules, a marble slab was let into the wall bearing this inscription,

JESUS CHRISTUS REX FLORENTINI
POPULI P. DECRETO ELECTUS.

Though altered by Cosimo, this inscription is still there. The statute was never formally repealed or annulled, and after four centuries of usurpations, Papini is proud to avow himself soldier and subject of Christ the King.

The plan of the *Storia* is simplicity itself. It begins with the birth of Christ, and follows the course of His ministry to the crucifixion and the ascension. The chapters are short, each dealing with a single theme, and bearing such titles as "The Stable", "The Shepherds," "The Three Magi," "Four Nails," "The Invisible Cross," Each episode is isolated, as it were, held up to the light and exhibited like some rare jewel. The narrative moves quickly, organized by an art which conceals art. Comment, interpretation, unexpected applications and analogies support it. A master hand is at work, urged by a white heat of faith and love. The teaching of Jesus regarding His "Kingdom", His "Joyous Message," is expounded with the force and freshness of a discoverer telling of his new land, of his new star. It is as if a man should find a hidden treasure in a field. Papini's old fierceness of invective, his withering scorn, his devastating criticism, are now reserved for the enemies of his King. He has pointed his batteries against the positions he has abandoned. Nowhere in modern literature is such a thorough change of front to be found. The closest parallel is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles concerning one Saul of Tarsus.

The first chapter begins with the abrupt statement, "Christ was born in a stable." Papini insists on the literal fact. It was a real stable, utterly unlike the dainty imaginings of Christian painters and architects. It was the prison of animals that toil for man, a wretched barn of olden times in a poor country, a dark, dirty, evil-smelling place. Papini sees an analogy. Not by chance was Jesus born in a stable. Perhaps the whole world is nothing but an immense stable, where, by some infernal alchemy, men transmute beautiful things like the grass of the field and the flowers of spring into ordure. The chapter ends, "On this earth, this fragile sty, where all the ornaments and all the perfumes cannot hide the stable

litter, Jesus appeared one night, born of a pure Virgin, and with no armour but innocence."

Here is none of the timidity or the unctuousness of the orthodox "Lives." The touch on things divine is fresh and original, and so it is throughout. The reader is in continual suspense, and turns the leaf hurriedly to find out what is coming next. And he is continually surprised, for there is no lapse into the dull, the commonplace, or the expected. Herein is displayed the art of the novelist. Though the *Storia* is twice as long as the ordinary novel, the interest never flags. This first chapter is typical of all.

One hundred and sixty pages are devoted to the Passion, the Last Supper, and the Crucifixion; and the proportion is just. The Death of Jesus on the cross is different from every other death. It is unlike the passing of any of the world's heroes or martyrs. It is not a philosophic taking leave of life, like the death of Socrates. It seems far more than the execution of a political offender outside a Syrian city. It is an event in which the universe is concerned. Countless eyes are watching the tragedy of Golgotha; countless intelligences are straining towards it; suns and stellar systems are witnesses of this awful mystery. Everything in the *Storia* leads up to this dread climax. Papini has succeeded in his artistic aim of writing a tale absorbing in its interest. It is as if it never had been told before.

His presentation of the personality of Jesus is also fresh and vivid. He is the Divine Man, the Sinless One. His personality is unique. In Him there cannot be even the signs of a conversion. His first words have the same accent as the last. The source from which they flow is clear from the very first day. In it are no dregs of turbidity, no deposit of evil sediment. He begins confident, open, absolute, with the recognized authority of purity. We feel that he has left nothing dark behind. His voice is high, free, flowing in a melodious song which savours neither of the miserable wines of pleasure nor the hoarseness of repentance. The limpidity of His glance, His smile, His thought, is not the serenity which comes after the clouds, nor the uncertain whiteness of Dawn slowly overcoming the malignant shades of night. It is the limpidity of Him who was born once only, and remained a child even in His maturity—the limpidity, the transparence, the tranquility, the peace of a day which will end in night, but will not be clouded before the evening—a day eternal and equable—an infancy which will not be tarnished until death.

He goes about among the polluted with the natural simplicity

of the pure, among the sinners with the natural power of the innocent, among the sick with the natural freedom of the sound.

The convert, on the other hand, is always at the bottom of his soul a little troubled. A single bitter drop remaining, a light shadow of uncleanness, an access of regret, a fleeting touch of temptation, suffice to drive him into agonies. There always remains the doubt whether he has put off the old man to the last skin, whether he has not slain, but only stunned the other who dwelt within him. The convert has paid so dearly for his salvation, he has endured and suffered so much, and it seems to him so precious but so frail a blessing, that he is afraid of putting it to the touch and losing it. He does not avoid sinners, but he approaches them with an involuntary shiver, with a fear, sometimes even avowed, of fresh contagion, with the suspicion that seeing again the mire in which even he took pleasure will revive in him too cruelly the insupportable memory of his shame, and it rouses him to despair of his final salvation. He, who was a servant, is not, after he becomes a master, careless with servants; he who was poor, is not when he becomes rich, generous towards the poor; nor is he who was a sinner, always after his repentance the friend of sinners.

This is the language of a recent convert; the passage is autobiography. After carrying this acute analysis of the convert's psychology still further, Papini contrasts the untroubled soul of Jesus. In Him this presumptive stage of convert somewhere in His past never crops up in any shape or form. It is never suggested by the most remote allusion or inference; it is not to be traced in the least of His acts, in the most obscure of His words. His love for sinners has nothing of the penitent's febrile eagerness to make proselytes. What sways Him is "Love by nature, not from a sense of duty,—brotherly kindness with no implied reproof,—spontaneous fraternity of a friend, who has no need to choke down repugnance,—attraction to the impure of the Pure One who has no fear of polluting Himself, and is sure of His power to cleanse,—love of saints in supreme moments of sainthood,—love which makes all other loves seem vulgar,—love such as was never known before He came,—love which is rarely seen again, only by remembrance and imitation of that love,—love which will call itself Christian, and never by any other name,—love divine,—love of Jesus,—love."

Love is the key word of all Christ's teaching. It explains the Fatherhood of God; it is the heart of the "Kingdom," and the "Good News"; it is the fulfilling of the Law. This love is a new thing under the sun. Papini makes short work of the common notion that Christ's doctrine was a sort of mosaic or patchwork of fragments

from older religions and ethics, that other teachers anticipated Him, that some were even superior to Him. Love, as taught by Jesus, was utterly unknown to the ancients. As He revealed it, it was a disruptive force able to shatter old creeds and turn the world upside down. It is against the Old Law; it is even against Nature. Men accepted readily the precept to love your neighbour and to hate your enemy; that was natural. Christ taught us, "Love your enemies." It is a hard saying. Though we cannot imitate Him who prayed for His torturers with His dying breath, we see clearly that in no other way can enemies be converted into friends.

The freshness of Papini's handling is evident also in the chapters dealing with the Parables and the Sermon on the Mount. He contrasts their transcendent wisdom with the commonplace ethics and specific commands of the Baptist; and he is eloquent on Christ's method of communicating the truth. "The marvellous exceptional-ity of His message has thrown into the shade His no less marvellous poetic originality. . . . His triumphant childhood of spirit, the rustic and popular mould in which He had grown, the reading of few books,—but amongst the richest of all poetry—His loving communion with the life of the fields and of animals, and, above all and before all, the divine, impassioned eagerness to enlighten those who sat in darkness, to save those in danger of being lost for ever, to carry supreme happiness to the most wretched, (because true poetry is not kindled at the light of lamps, but at the light of the stars and the sun. . . . in love, in suffering, in the soul moved to its depths) made of Jesus a poet, an inventor of living and eternal images with which He has performed a miracle not recorded by the Evangelists, the miracle of communicating the most sublime truths by means of tales so simple, so familiar, so full of grace, that after twenty centuries they shine forth with that unique freshness which is Eternity. . . . The Parables are the figured commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, such as a Poet would make to whom is attached in a sense more apt than to all others born on earth, the epithet Divine."

Ever since the Renaissance, scholars have found the Greek of the New Testament inferior to Attic Greek, and, consequently, less worthy of their attention. The latest critic, J. Middleton Murray insists that the Gospels are deficient in "style." He calls them "examples of all that writing should not be." . . . "It is not the authors of the Gospels who have given us the imaginative realization of the character of Jesus. . . . The written evidence of an honest policeman would give us as much", are other characteristic deliverances. This criticism of the form enforces the richness of

the content. If the Gospels are devoid of all literary artifice and owe nothing to the medium in which they are written, all the more marvellous is the revelation of the unique and transcendent Personality shining through the mean words, the dry memoranda, the honest written evidence. Herein also is the marvel of this Italian critic's "Story." How did he discover such a Figure in such paltry records? By what power did he build up a Divine Man from such poor materials? The Christian has an answer to both questions. The mere student of literature is compelled to note a change as from death to life, and the presence of a new, inexplicable joy. He is left pondering,

Whence has the man the balm that brightens all?

The *Storia di Cristo* begins with a polemic and ends with a prayer. Apparently it has been evoked by the awful spectacle of the Great War. It is the strong crying of a soul in distress for the speedy coming of Christ. Its tenor may be judged by the closing sentences:—

The Great Experience is coming to an end. In straying away from the Gospel, men have found only desolation and death. More than one promise and more than one threat have come true. Henceforward we the Hopeless have only the hope of Thy Coming again. If Thou comest not to rouse the sleepers nesting in the reeking slime of our Inferno, it is a sign that the chastisement still seems to Thee too certain and too light for our treason, and that Thou willest not to alter the order of Thy laws. Thy will be done, now and for ever, in Heaven and on earth!

But we, the Last of Men, we watch for Thee; and we will watch for Thee, despite our unworthiness and every impossibility. And all the love that we can wring from our wasted hearts will be for Thee, the Crucified, Who wert tortured for love of us, and now torturest us with all the potency of Thine implacable Love.