

BLACKFRIARS

FLORENTINES BOTH

SOCIALIST, atheist, revolutionary—Christian, Catholic, defender of tradition—from Papini, the man of paradox, but true Florentine withal, we were bound to hear sooner or later, something new on the subject of the great Florentine poet. This Giovanni Papini has now given in his *Dante Vivo*.¹

The subdued light of conventional criticism is hardly to be expected from Papini. His volcanic mind erupts, leaving sometimes his thought buried in the cinders, but when it comes to the surface it is at least original, and holds, if it fails to convince.

By way of parenthesis it is not so extraordinary as it at first appears that Papini came eventually into the Church: a man who had taught himself everything, who had run his head as a battering ram into every form of thought and philosophy, who had tasted the bitterness of human insufficiency, what possible way was open to such a one, but to stoop and enter the lowly portal that leads to peace. But this is only by the way.

In his criticism of Dante, Papini often purposely leaves us in the dark, he is apt to lose all sense of proportion and to overshoot the mark. Then at the moment when we begin to chafe against his methods, he pulls us up by his own shrewd common sense, or else infects us with his own admiration for the poet. It is his aim to depict the man rather than the poet, but the poet often carries him away. The *man* Dante is his subject, a subject for which he has personal interest and sympathy. Dante with his unparalleled daring appeals to this daring modern Florentine. "Who," he asks, "was this uncrowned king, this unknown prophet who armed himself against the higher powers, by what right did he appoint himself judge, taking upon himself even God's office of judgment?" Papini understands because

¹ *Dante Vivo*. By Giovanni Papini. (Libreria editrice fiorentina, Florence. 14 Lire.)

FLORENTINES BOTH

he too armed himself often enough against the higher powers, appointing himself judge, even in matters concerning the Divinity. "Where and when," he goes on, "do we hear of a mere wandering exile addressing manifestos to an emperor and to his own people?" *Perché poeta* is Papini's answer. Did he not arrogate to himself also this poet's right at times?

Papini is at pains to show how the great poet's daring was allied to very sensible fear; how this man who could thunder against powers visible and invisible, was himself often a prey to fear, timidity, and dread. Does Papini find in this also a matter of personal sympathy? The undercurrent of admiration for the poet runs strong, and yet Papini succeeds in lighting up the figure of the man Dante—the lonely man, the uncrowned poet, the exile separated from friends, and condemned to the society of a few school masters and notaries, the banished singer who wrote the *Paradiso* knowing that his life's hopes would never be fulfilled, and that he would never receive the laurel crown in his *bel San Giovanni*. The crown was reserved for his future biographer!

According to Papini no one can understand Dante who is not a Catholic, a Florentine and an artist. Here we have an example of the lack of proportion. Is the study of a world poet to be confined to the few who fulfil these three requirements? Is Dante to be bottled down for the private consumption of some few Giovanni Papinis? That only a Catholic can really understand Dante's vision, based as it is on the theology of the Church, we agree, yet to how many outside the Church has not the poet appealed? That a Florentine has special advantages for appreciating this great Florentine we are ready to admit, as also that only an artist can really enter into a work of art, but is it not one of the measures of great art that it contains a message for all, and perhaps a special message for some, quite unrelated to time or circumstance? Papini may have the advantage of knowing every nook and alley of his beloved Florence, of breathing the fine air of the thirteenth century which still lingers in that city, of inhaling the atmosphere of faith out of which the Divine Comedy sprang, but is it certain that he, who

BLACKFRIARS

scorned the poem's message in his youth, is privileged to understand it in later years better than another, or that this atmosphere of faith which did not envelop his childhood is now his exclusive portion?

The biography is of course a deliberate condemnation of the critics. Temperamentally irate, Papini is perhaps right this time in his irritation against the criticism of the merely learned. His quarrel is with those who would approach the great poem along the narrow roads of mere research. He will not have the *Divine Comedy* put under the microscope of the scientist. He rightly argues that knowledge alone will bring no one nearer to the soul of the master, and Papini himself is as keen on the soul of the poet as he is keen on the character of the man. Here we cannot quarrel with him, even if he wished the quarrel, for with him we must agree that it takes a poet to understand a poet, and only an artist in words can appreciate that inflowing of soul into language, that making of verse, rhythm, syllable and sound, such finely wrought instruments of the poet's power as Dante has done.

Papini's assertion that Dante was not a Christian comes as a surprise and shock. Is the question mere paradox or has it deeper roots? Does the fiery-souled disciple understand better than another the fiery-souled master? Have these two Florentines, at war with their people and their times stretched hands across the centuries recognizing that to warlike spirits the gospel way is a very narrow way, and that meekness in some cases is only compatible with sanctity? The path of soul fighters who storm the citadels of conscience is necessarily very different from that pursued by those who walk the plains. Christian! How much and how little may not be understood by the term. To a mind like Papini's may it not suggest labyrinths of abnegation to which the proud Florentine poet never stooped. Possibly the man who once scorned Christ, understands better than another the humility that Christ's law demands. This may account for Papini's daring in refusing to the great poet whom he loves, the title of Christian.

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