

GIOVANNI PAPINI'S INSATIABLE THIRST

A TRANSPERSONAL JOURNEY

Translated by Alberto Gabba



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There could be no more appropriate synthesis of Giovanni Papini's psycho-spiritual development than the motto: *"The only way out is upwards"*. But how does one find this way? Papini intuitively followed what Assagioli would later call the "internal method": he started from the direct experience of his own being, he observed himself, his desires, his insatiable thirst for something unknown and vague, and he sought his true Self.

Papini was a colleague, correspondent and friend of Assagioli at the time of the magazine "Leonardo", so much so that he dedicated a story to him in 1905, entitled "The Deep-Sea Diver's Prayer", for Assagioli's seventeenth birthday, writing to him: *"I who love You very much, as one who could be my future brother"*. But beyond that, who really was Giovanni Papini, this great provocateur and tireless seeker?

Papini is best known as a Futurist and co-founder of "Lacerba", but the *Futurist Papini* was only one of

his many masks, that he continually changed until the final – I dare say – manifestation of his mystical subpersonality: the *Inner Bonaventura*. His friend Piero Bargellini calls him *Giovanni Bonaventura Papini*, a name Papini adopted upon his entry into the Third Order of Franciscans at La Verna on July 14, 1944.

Papini was born with the *disease of grandeur*, as he himself confesses in his famous "Un uomo finito" (A Man – Finished). His adolescence was marked by restlessness, a sense of inferiority, and an insatiable thirst for something he could not put into words. As a young man, he was an atheist and anticlerical, which is not surprising, considering that his father was a Garibaldian and a Freemason, in stark contrast to his Catholic mother, who had him baptized in secret. The young Papini was, in practice, an "anti-everything": he rebelled against institutions – especially school, which he considered a prison – against the bourgeoisie, traditions, academism, religions, norms, dogmas... against everything.

He became famous as an intellectual, man of letters, philosopher, critic, and self-taught *psychologist*, creator and founder of highly influential magazines: "Leonardo", "Lacerba", "La Voce", and "L'Anima". His style was unparalleled, utterly personal: combative, passionate, provocative. His cutting quips and unstoppable sarcasm caused a stir and scandal everywhere. One thing is certain: he had an incredibly powerful charisma. There was something indescribable about him, simultaneously irritating and fascinating. His great friend Prezzolini wrote:

"Here is a man different from the others – you say – one who, if the masses consider him ugly, you feel is merely strange and exceptional. He is marked by God, and this may be a good or bad sign, but it is certainly a sign of a personal destiny".

No one could remain indifferent to him: they either hated him or adored him.

Let us briefly look at his famous masks, for which he was known, so much so that he was called a

chameleon: interventionist, pragmatist, metaphysician, atheist, futurist, esoteric, *psychologist*, convert, anti-modernist, bourgeois, Christian, affectionate family man (surrounded by women, which contrasts greatly with the young Papini who, in the magazine *Lacerba*, published articles such as “The massacre of women” or “Hate one another”), Franciscan tertiary, etc. Prezzolini also effectively described the multiplicity of faces of his friend: «*The figure of Giovanni Papini is so rich that without harm it can be pruned of more than a leafy branch and more than one top covered in flowers, without it suffering, rather gaining what is its solid trunk*».

Since we are talking about a tree, it is natural to evoke the Tree of Life, represented in the evocative and well-known illustration by Petra Guggisberg Nocelli. From this perspective, the *solid trunk* can be interpreted as the “Ego–Self” axis or, in the terminology of $\Psi\sigma$ (editor’s note: acronym for psychosynthesis), as the “personal Ego–Higher Self” axis.

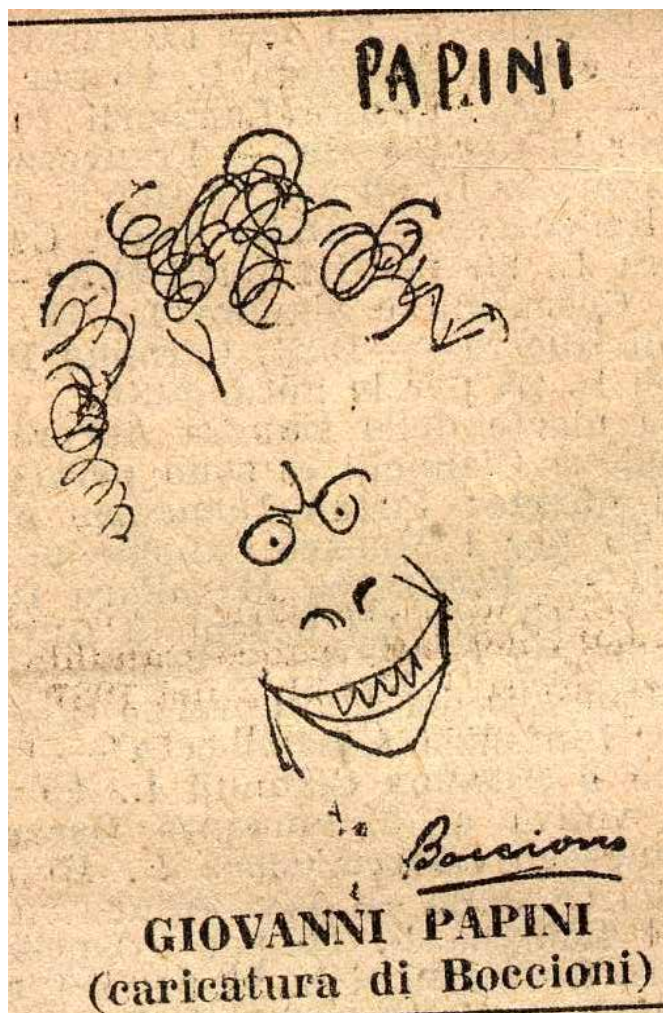
Papini himself writes, again in “A Man – Finished”: «*The peels, the rinds, the clothes, the masks, are — I know, I know it well too — nothing but peels, rinds, clothes, masks. They are nothing more, nothing more substantial, more intimate. The peels fall off, the clothes are undressed, the masks fade, and what remains is the concept, the internal and indestructible skeleton of truth. What covers it, is inessential, variable, transitory. [...] The body, the matter are not enough; we seek the spirit, the profound. Do you want anatomy? Here is anatomy: peeled and cut and dissected. This is my body, this is my flesh — but the breath that animated it, the idea that informed it, where are they? [...] The “Sturm und Drang” has passed, but the crowd of that tumult and that storm is in the I that remains, it is in the perpetual, absolute I, which has contact with eternity and must participate in eternity*».

What powerful words – and how powerfully interpretable with the tools of $\Psi\sigma$! This will be a characteristic trait of Papini even later: in his writings we continually encounter the fundamental assumptions of $\Psi\sigma$, the

essential traits of his vision of the human being.

I believe that, at the time of Leonardo, there was a mutual influence between Papini and Assagioli: the vision of the world and of the human psyche of the two young men developed together, to then be elaborated and carried forward by each in their own sphere.

When speaking of $\Psi\sigma$, it is natural to think of subpersonalities. In Papini’s case, four primary subpersonalities can be identified, whose different predominances manifested themselves in the external world through the masks or roles mentioned above. They are: *the self-reflective*, *the mystical*, *the independent* and *the leader*.



During his tormented psycho-spiritual journey, Papini was able to actively use these subpersonalities to seek that Absolute that he intuited – even if vaguely – beyond his own emotions, thoughts and desires, directed precisely by these subpersonalities.

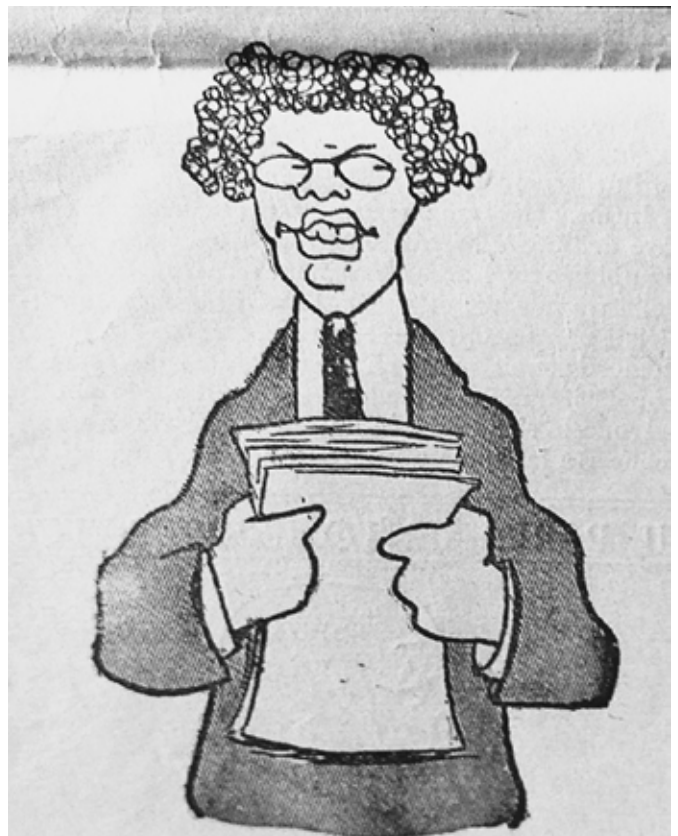
He had a clear feeling that deep within himself, there was something to be revealed beneath the psychic layers. And he wanted to discover it: *«How will I know myself if I cannot find myself in this multitude of humanity that holds me and penetrates me from all sides? And how will I ever truly be myself if I can't recognize myself, if I don't know what the irreducible centre is, the last vestige of my personality? I'm not looking for a man, I'm not looking for Man: I want myself, only myself. And I don't know who he is, or where he is, or what he really thinks. With this me, swaddled, dressed, and fed by others, I must live – I must live forever, as with a stranger»* “A Man – Finished”.

Papini first freed himself from external influences, to the point of remaining *alone* and as independent as possible from everything external, on the threshold of a new life, now guided by within, and he asks himself: *«Who am I? But what is this destiny of mine? What am I? Now that I have only my own rebuilt and rediscovered strength, and my desperate exaltation, I cannot draw inspiration from extraneous reasons and I cannot commend myself to ghosts outside myself. Every god, sacred and profane, Asian and European, has gone into hiding. There is no god before me. I have placed my cause in nothingness, like the ferocious One. The universe is divided into two parts: I – and the rest. Now this internal core of mine must give life to everything»* (“Gog” – G. Papini).

Then Papini strips away every superfluous part of himself, like the petals of an onion – as St. John of the Cross also writes – and seeks that inner essence that exists independently of everything and everyone, by its own right.

He is tormented by doubt: Does an “essential self” really exist? Is there an authentic, independent, absolute core within us? Or is it just a hallucination: *«If I dismantle the ego piece by piece, I always find pieces*

and fragments that come from outside – I could attach a label of origin to each one. [...] Where then is the profound and autonomous core, in which no one else participates, generated by no one else, and that I can truly call mine? And is the only thing we believe to be truly ours – the ego – a reflection, a hallucination of pride?» (“Gog”). Assagioli's words seem to answer this anguished question by removing all doubts: *«But this “phenomenal Self” is nothing but the manifestation in ordinary consciousness, nothing but the reflection of the “Real Self,” the active, permanent principle, and true substance of our being. What we call the “ordinary self” is that much, or that little, of the “higher Self” that waking consciousness can welcome, assimilate, and implement at a given moment. It is therefore something contingent, changeable, a “variable quantity.” It is a reflection; but one that can become ever more vivid and luminous, and which may one day come to unify with its Source»* (“Il mistero dell'io” – The Mystery of the I).



The question is: who guides us from within? The “earthly heart”, that is, the ego, or the “heavenly heart”, the Higher Self? Do we surrender control to the higher forces, do we allow them to lead our lives? Can the clash between ego and Self – this vital and mortal struggle – lead to that point where the ego is capable of renouncing itself, almost annihilating itself, in the name of a higher purpose, and thus transcending itself, expanding the ego, making it fuller, broader?

This self-transcendence has many degrees, but already the first steps – even if feeble – have enormous importance. From that moment on, human efforts, resistances, tense and anxious hopes dissolve in the calm ocean of trusting abandonment.

But how can such a radical change be achieved? In Papini’s case, it certainly wasn’t overnight. He had to live, experience, and suffer through the various phases of spiritual development – phases described so acutely and excellently by Assagioli in his famous writing, “Sviluppo spirituale e disturbi neuropsichici” (Spiritual Development and Neuropsychic Disorders) (1933).

The guiding thread that Papini always followed, and which was in some way the essence of his existence, from birth until his death, was the search for the Absolute, without compromise or surrender.

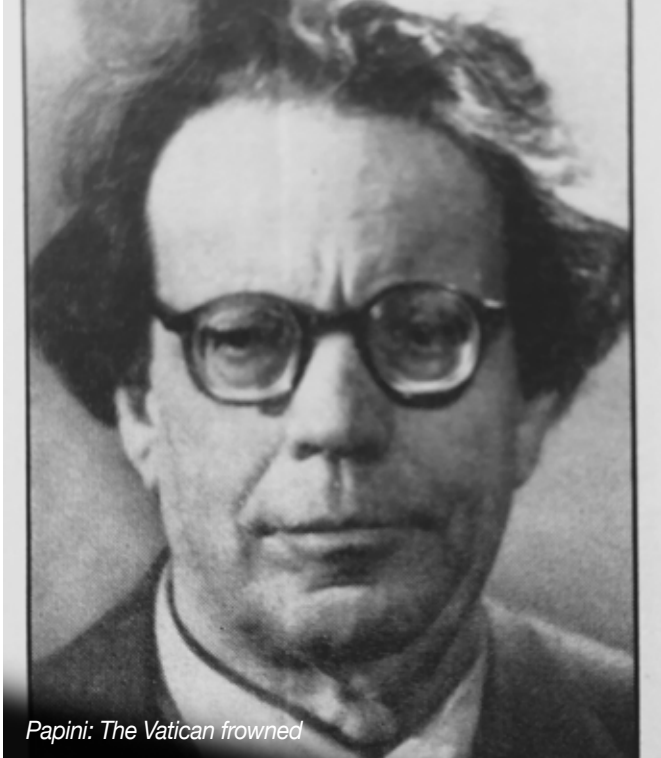
As Alberto Viviani wrote: «The spiritual and artistic life of “Gianfalco” could be summarized in a few words: a perpetual search for the Absolute – and not search for particular and relative truths, but for certainty» (editor’s note: Gianfalco – a pseudonym that Giovanni Papini adopted for his pamphlets).

And it is so true, and these words are well justified by the words of Papini himself: *«I ask and I beg, humbly, on my knees, with all the strength and passion of my soul, for a little certainty; [...] I have sought nothing but this. Since I was a child, I have only lived for this reason. I have knocked on every door, I have questioned every eye, I have asked every mouth, and I have searched thousands and tens of thousands of hearts in vain. [...] But nothing, absolutely nothing has come, and no one has answered. No one has answered in a way as to extinguish every desire and need to ask again; nothing has come that has*

calmed my overly impatient heart and satiated this soul of mine, thirsty as a desert. [...] I want a certain certainty – even just one! – I want an indestructible faith – even just one. I want a true truth. [...] But a truth that allows me to touch the innermost substance of the world; the ultimate support, the most solid; a truth that implants itself in my head and no longer makes me conceive of anything that contradicts it; a truth, in short, that is knowledge, a true, perfect, definitive, authentic, indisputable knowledge. Without this truth I can no longer live».



Giovanni Papini



Papini: *The Vatican frowned*

It was a long journey before Papini found his “certainty,” which came with the Christian faith, at the time of his famous conversion, which occurred around the years 1919-1920.

At the beginning of his journey, he was still looking for higher, external ideals that could give meaning to his existence. The first “external unifying centre” for him was the ideal of omniscience, represented by sciences and facts. The library became a true sanctuary for him: «To me, all books were sacred»; «Everything in there seemed holy and majestic to me [...] Those filthy, faded little seats [...] seemed to my eyes as colossal and sumptuous as thrones, and the vast silence weighed on my soul more grave and solemn than that of a cathedral» (from: *A Man – Finished*).

He devoted all his energy, all his time, to this purpose, and in the process, even his eyes were ruined. His words, also from “*A Man – Finished*”, bear witness to this: «From this lightless solitude, the lust for knowledge saved me»; «As the mystic immerses himself in the one

God and seeks to forget every sensible detail, I dived and lost myself in that sea of wisdom which, at the very moment of filling me, gave me new appetite and a new burning».

He therefore understood that his thirst would not be quenched, no matter how much he read or how much knowledge he accumulated: «*I had drowned in facts, but facts were not enough for me. No matter how many I probed and pieced together, they did not exhaust infinity. [...] My mind, yearning for vastness and completeness, sought universal concepts as the only meal that could finally satisfy its hunger. [...] I believed – I believed – in a single substance that composed all the existences of the universe [...] the profound and substantial unity of all things [...] I felt it and lived it within me, in every moment of life [...] the single substance, the substratum of the variable everything, was not an invention, but reality itself*» (“*A Man – Finished*”).

Papini perceives, almost painfully, the great unity hidden behind the “variable everything”. A unity that, however, he is still unable to approach: he cannot find the tools, he does not know the nature of the phenomenon, he proceeds gropingly – but this search consumes all his energy. For a certain period, he behaves – as he himself admits – as if what he does were right and sufficient, as if data and logic could suffice to achieve the desired certainty; but eventually he is forced to admit his failure.

(to be continued in the next issue in April 2026)