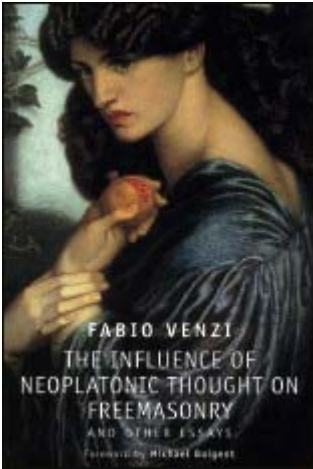


Book Review



THE INFLUENCE OF NEOPLATONIC THOUGHT ON FREEMASONRY AND OTHER ESSAYS.

Fabio Venzi

***Book Guild Publishing, Brighton, 2007, xv and 106pp.
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This is a thought-provoking and stimulating book, not least because as it was written by the current Grand Master of the Regular Grand Lodge of Italy. It comprises six chapters or essays which focus on topics of obvious interest to the author. The subjects explored include an examination of the ideas underpinning modern Freemasonry, the Italian Fascist's attack on the craft during the 1920s and Freemasonry's role in today's world, both as an ethical force - and what Venzi terms, society's 'moral observatory'.

In the opening essay Venzi postulates the idea that Neoplatonism lies at the base of Masonic thought. Neoplatonism, or rather simply Platonism, is a term generally applied to a later form of Platonic philosophy that emerged during the third and fifth centuries A.D., a form that was subsequently championed by several philosophers of the Italian Renaissance such as Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. The author makes special mention of Pico della Mirandola who, it is noted, effectively sums up the masonic allegory of transforming coarse unpolished stone into fine ashlar in his famous work, *Oration on the dignity of man*, for as he stated, '[Man is] a sculptor who must create and shape his own form'.

The reader is invited to consider a group of English seventeenth-century thinkers collectively known as the Cambridge Platonists, who, it is argued, were responsible for the creation of modern Freemasonry. This is a controversial thesis: there is no known evidence linking the principle thinkers in this group such as Henry More, Benjamin Whichcote and Ralph Cudworth, with seventeenth-century Freemasonry. At the same time however, it is evident that Platonism did play an important role in the fashioning of modern Freemasonic thought.

All in all, I would certainly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the history of ideas, and especially in reading two fascinating essays on the calamitous feud between Italian Freemasonry and Fascism. And while it may be said that Freemasonry was attacked and banned by all the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth-century, the regimes most virulently hostile to the association were undoubtedly those of a Fascist hue; as for three centuries Freemasonry has championed ideals that lie at the heart a true Democracy, namely liberty of conscience and tolerance — ideals that have no place in an authoritarian state.

Matthew Scanlan