

Esotericism in the first 3 Degrees. The errors of esoterologists.
Esotericism in the first 3 Degrees. The errors of the 'esoterologists'.

How should Freemasonry be collocated in the context of this study of *Esotericism*? In the previous chapter, we have demonstrated that to assess *Esotericism* on a par with any other social phenomenon would not help to solve the issue, as emphasized by Riffard himself: “*But how can we acknowledge the existence of several forms of esotericism within the context of one esotericism alone? The problem is raised by esotericism itself on encountering a form of esotericism that differs from its own. To recognise a plurality of esotericisms may prove more embarrassing than acknowledging the existence of a series of philosophies, as philosophy purports to represent a search for the truth, whilst esotericism is presented as being in possession of a secret. How therefore can we study esotericisms as if they were one alone?*”¹. To overcome this problem, the solution proposed herein was to step outside the exquisitely phenomenological field of ‘esoteric’ forms and to liaise with he who *practices Esotericism*, to reveal the *constant* aspired to by Riffard in the ‘ideal type’ identified in the person of the ”Initiate”.

With regard to the relationship between *Esotericism* and Freemasonry, I should start by saying that, in my opinion, to define the Masonic initiatic pathway as ‘esoteric’ would be purely pleonastic, although this axiom is far too frequently at the centre of debate. It is even more serious that this occurs not only in the myriad of frequently confused pamphlets circulating on Freemasonry, but also in important studies of *Esotericism*, in which a presumed *absence* of esoteric content is highlighted particularly for the first *Three Degrees* of Freemasonry.

Accordingly, the above-mentioned Faivre and Riffard, as already mentioned, two of the most widely renowned representatives of studies focusing on Western *Esotericism*, on referring to Masonic

¹ Pierre A. Riffard, op. cit., p.58.

Esotericism, in my opinion, seriously misjudge the issue. Indeed, the works of the two Frenchmen display a clear and inexplicable *underestimation* of the ‘esoteric’ component of the first *Three Degrees* of Anglo Saxon Freemasonry, commonly known as the Degrees of ‘Blue Lodge’ or “Symbolic’ Freemasonry. The two French scholars maintain that in the Masonic doctrines and rituals (and generally speaking, to refer to ‘rituals’ may be misleading, due to the hundreds of rituals contemplated) the esoteric components are present only in the subsequent Degrees, the so-called ‘High Degrees’. I completely disagree with this view, which is wholly unsustainable from both an historic and an initiatic point of view, which I shall now demonstrate.

Let us commence with the Frenchman Pierre Riffard, who wrote: “*The esotericism of the XVIII century largely coincides with a mystic form of Freemasonry...from an esoteric point of view, the crucial date is not the year 1717, although that same year the Grand Lodge of London was formed, the break occurred in 1736. This gave rise to the occult form of esoteric Freemasonry. The Knight of Ramsay cites “the necessary qualities” to become a member of the “highly noble and illustrious Order of Masons”...The order claimed to date back to the Knights Templar. Thus, Freemasonry was viewed as a “Universal Dictionary of liberal Arts and useful Sciences” which however did not include theology and politics. From this date onwards a period of splendid developments followed. The great names of Freemasonry are: A. Court de Gobelin, L.C. de Saint Martin, J.-B. Willermoz, N.A. Kirchberg, Joseph de Maistre, F. Tienman; the most important organisms are the Strict Templar Observance (S.T.O., 1753), the Order of Knight-Masons Elect Priests of the Universe (1738), the Hermetic Rite (1770), the Holy Order of Knights Beneficent of the Holy City (H.O.K.B.H.C, 1778). The enlightened Freemasonry of the XVIII century is a global form of esoterism. Through the creation of those known as the high degrees, which were conferred subsequent to those commonly*

used in ancient Freemasonry (apprentice, fellow craft, master mason), the thinkers were in possession of the ritual tool to be applied in a detailed speculation into the symbols used in Solomon's Temple and in construction".² Essentially along the same lines as Riffard, Antoine Faivre in his *Esotericism* writes: "As we have had occasion to observe, it is particularly the high degrees in Freemasonry in which esoteric tendencies are expressed"³, further adding that: "Naturally, the high degree Rites are those suffused with esoteric content. For this reason, the Anglo Saxon Freemasonry is virtually devoid of such aspects"⁴, concepts which were likewise supported in other writings published by the French author: "Undoubtedly, it (Freemasonry) is not by its very nature "esoteric" in the sense implied by this term herein. Although for the first three degrees (blue) that form the basis, there is a link to symbolic and initiatic aspects, this is not sufficient to define esotericism. We have however seen that in the high degrees of certain Masonic systems there exists a level of esotericism, together with an esotericism-like nature of Masonic literature"⁵.

To this regard, another renowned scholar of *Esotericism*, Jean-Paul Corsetti, is in partial agreement with the previous theories and, in his *History of Esotericism and the Occult Sciences* wrote: "The English Freemasonry is scarcely esoteric, only becoming so from the Third Degree of Master Mason, which was included in 1730 and was not known to Anderson"⁶.

It is now mandatory to ask ourselves: Where does this mistaken perception of Anglo Saxon Freemasonry derive from? Which authors, and in particular, which rituals, have the scholars addressed in forming their opinions? The issue is not easy to

² Pierre Riffard, op. cit., p. 171-172.

³ Antoine Faivre, op. cit., p.123.

⁴ Antoine Faivre, op. cit., p.100.

⁵ Antoine Faivre *Esoterismo e Tradizione*, Elledici, Turin, 1999, p.72-73.

⁶ Jean-Paul Corsetti, *Storia dell'Esoterismo e delle Scienze Occulte*, Gremese Editore, Rome, 2003, p.276.

solve, and is particularly inexplicable in view of the fact that both Faivre and Riffard in their writings refer to major esotericists such as René Guénon and Oswald Wirth who however, as I shall reveal subsequently, with regard to this same issue, have expressed views in open contrast to those of Riffard and Faivre.

The opinion conveyed by the renowned French esotericist Guénon on the High degrees could not be clearer: *“Masonic initiation comprises three successive phases, and there can thus be only three grades, representing these three phases; from this it would seem to follow that the system of high grades are completely useless, at least in theory, since in their entirety the rituals of the three symbolic grades describe the complete cycle of initiation. However, since Masonic initiation is in fact symbolic, it produces Masons who are only symbols of true Masons, simply outlining for them the course of the steps they must take in order to arrive at real initiation. It is this goal that, at least originally, was the aim of the various systems of high grades, which seem to have been instituted precisely in order to realize in practice the Great Work that symbolic Masonry teaches in theory. It must be recognized, however, that very few of these systems actually achieve their proposed goal; in most cases, one meets with points of incoherence, lacunae, and superfluties, and the initiatic value of certain rituals appears quite meagre, especially when compared to that of the symbolic grades. These failings are all the more conspicuous the greater number of degrees the system contains; and if such is already the case with the Scottish Rites of 25 and 33 degrees, what of those Rites having 90, 97 or even 120 degrees? This multiplicity of degrees is all the more useless in that one is obliged to confer them successively”*.⁷

It is however the Swiss Oswald Wirth who states the clearest view, and one I personally share. In addition to possessing a highly ‘esoteric’ view of Freemasonry, with regard to the differences between the first *Three Degrees* and the High Degrees,

⁷ René Guénon, *Gli Alti Gradi Massonici*, in ‘La Gnose’, May 1910.

Wirth wrote: *“The goal of Masonic initiation is to enlighten men, that they might be taught to work usefully, in full conformity with the very purpose of their existence. Now in order to enlighten men, it is first necessary to rid them of all that might keep them from seeing the Light. They are therefore submitted to certain purifications intended to eliminate heterogeneous residues, themselves the causes of the opacity of the layers that serve as so many protective shells for the spiritual kernel of man. As soon as they are made clear, their complete transparence allows the rays of outward Light to penetrate to the conscious center of the initiate. Then his entire being is progressively saturated by Light until he is enlightened in the highest sense of the word; he is thereafter known also as an adept, himself transformed into a radiant focus of Light. Masonic initiation is thus made up of three distinct phases, consecrated successively to the discovery, assimilation, and propagation of Light. These phases are represented by the three grades of Apprentice, Fellow, and Master, corresponding to the triple mission of the Masons, which consists first in searching for, then possessing, and finally being able to spread the Light.*

The number of these grades is absolute: there can be only three, no more, no less. The invention of various systems known as high grades rests solely on an equivocation, by which the initiatic grades, strictly limited in number to three, are confused with the degrees of initiation, the multitude of which is necessarily indefinite. The initiatic grades correspond to the triple program pursued through Masonic initiation. They carry in their esotericism a solution to the three questions of the Sphinx's riddle: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? and they thereby correspond to all that can interest men. They are immutable in their fundamental character, and in their trinity they form a complete whole, to which nothing can either be added or taken away: Apprenticeship and Fellowship are the two pillars supporting Mastery”. As to the degrees of initiation, they allow

*the initiate to penetrate more or less deeply into the esotericism of each grade. From this there results an indefinite number of different ways of entering into possession of the three grades of Apprentice, Fellow, and Master.”*⁸

Indeed, Guénon and Wirth relentlessly moved the *focus* of the issue, an initiatic ritual cannot be interpreted from a ‘quantitative’ point of view (the more Degrees there are, the higher the content of *Esotericism...*), but obviously, from a ‘qualitative’ aspect, an operation which, to reach conclusion, dictates the need for a thorough ‘exegesis’ of the text, or rather of the *Ritual*. It is almost unbelievable that such competent scholars had failed to take into account the opinions of two of the most renowned experts in the field who were indeed cited in their works, but almost certainly not understood.

It could be argued that it was indeed often the Anglo Saxon Freemasons themselves who, in a certain sense, “undermined” the Masonic doctrines, reducing the latter to a prevalingly *moralistic* interpretation, as indeed had been emphasized previously by the Italian *esotericist* and Freemason Arturo Reghini, who referred to the excess of moralism in Freemasonry as follows: “*In the Anglo Saxon countries, in line with the prevalently moralistic trend adopted to date by Protestantism, better suited to being known as moralism, the exquisitely moral nature of the Masonic initiation, being the demise of vice and the birth of Masonic initiation, is underlined ... To take pride in this moralistic interpretation of the Masonic allegory invariably implies to sacrifice, misunderstand, or at the very least contort the esoteric, universal, non-sectarian character of the Order; it is unbelievable how much pleasure is taken in dressing Freemasonry in white dress for its First Communion and wallowing in morals up to one’s knees... The ancient Masonic tradition and the inspiration of rituals used in pagan ceremonies denote how the prevailing sense of the Masonic allegory is of a metaphysical nature, yielded by a true spiritual*

⁸ Oswald Wirth, *L’initiation Maconnique*, in ‘L’Initiation’, year 4°, n.4, January 1891.

palingenesis.”⁹

It is undeniable how Anglo Saxon countries have a tendency to interpret the Masonic ritual in a typically ‘moralistic’ manner, although it would be over-simplified and misleading to generalize. Indeed, numerous English scholars have represented the ‘esoteric’ nature of Freemasonry, among which the Englishman Walter Leslie Wilmshurst is undoubtedly one of the key players.

Walter Leslie Wilmshurst was born in Chichester in 1867 and died in London in 1929. He worked as a solicitor in Huddersfield and was initiated into the *Huddersfield Lodge n°290* of the *United Grand Lodge of England*. Wilmshurst subsequently became a member of the *Lodge of Harmony n°275* and the *Lodge of Living Stone*; he was appointed Provincial Grand Registrar in 1913 and held the position of Past Provincial Senior Warden in 1926 and Past Assistant Grand Director of Ceremony in 1929.

Wilmshurst was a true *esotericist*, and several of his articles were published on *The Occult Review*, a monthly journal that from 1905 to 1951 published interesting articles by a series of renowned esotericists and occultists of the time, among which Franz Hartmann, Arthur Edward Waite, Meredith Starr, and Aleister Crowley. He wrote, among other things, a considerable introduction to the volume ‘*Early Magnetism*’ by the English author Mary Ann South who wrote of hermeticism and alchemy.

Wilmshurst’s most renowned article ‘*The Meaning of Masonry*’, published in 1922, is one of the highest expressions of an ‘esoteric’ vision of Freemasonry, and the pages proposed here are a living example of an almost ‘mystical’ view which, at the same time, underline the perilous internal degeneration that was taking place. With regard to initiation, Wilmshurst, as cited below, affirms that this event is frequently seen as a mere formality, with membership in the Order in no way influencing the ‘reawakening’ of initiates who view it almost as a sort of social *club*. Conversely, “Initiation” should be interpreted as a ‘new beginning’, a break

⁹ Arturo Reghini, *Le Parole Sacre e di Passo*, Atanòr, Rome, 2008, p.92-94.

with the old methods and order of life and admission into a new, profound, supernatural order of self-discovery and knowledge, it implies leaving the common scopes of the outside world behind – these are merely shadows and scarce imitations of the underlying eternal Reality that is hidden within each of us. “Initiation”, in the interpretation provided by Wilmshurst, thus represents a ‘reawakening’ of the hidden faculties of the soul, leading to Light and Awareness:

*“Their admission is quite a lottery; their initiation too often remains but a formality, not an actual awakening into an order and quality of life previously unexperienced; their membership, unless such an awakening eventually ensues from the careful study and faithful practice of the Order’s teaching, has little, if any, greater influence upon them than would ensue from their joining a purely social club. For “Initiation” – for which there are so many candidates little conscious of what is implied in that for which they ask – what does it really mean and intend? It means a new beginning (initium); a breakaway from an old method and order of life and the entrance upon a new one of larger self-knowledge, deepened under standing and intensified virtue. It means a transit from merely natural state and standards of life towards a regenerate and super-natural state and standard. It means a turning away from the pursuit of the popular ideals of the outer world, in the conviction that those ideals are but shadows, images and temporal substitutions for the eternal Reality that underlies them, to the keen and undivertible quest of that Reality itself and the recovery of those genuine secrets of our being which lie buried and hidden at “the centre” or innermost part of our souls. It means the awakening of those hitherto dormant higher faculties of the soul which endue their possessor with “light” in the form of new enhanced consciousness and enlarged perceptive faculty”.*¹⁰

¹⁰ W.L. Wilmshurst, *The Meaning of Masonry*, Gramery Books, New York, 1980, p. 10-11.

Wilmshurst, adopting a vaguely Jungian representation, emphasized how the main purpose of Freemasonry was the acquisition of knowledge of *Self*, knowledge that is not acquired by passing from one Degree to the next, or through a sense of knowledge in general which, on the contrary, should be overlooked on the difficult and unique pathway that alone is capable of guaranteeing the achievement of the true aim: “*And Masonry was designed to teach self-knowledge. But self-knowledge involves a knowledge much deeper, vaster and more difficult than is popularity conceived. It is not to be acquired by formal passage through three or four degrees in as many months; it is a knowledge impossible of full achievement until knowledge of every other kind has been laid aside and a difficult path of life long and strenuously pursued that alone fits and leads its followers to its attainment*”¹¹.

The Author highlights the existence of a higher, more secret path of life compared to that usually undertaken, underlining how sooner or later, as the outside world fails to meet our innermost needs, we shall turn to ourselves and knock on the door of the inner world. This is the pathway that Freemasonry promises to illuminate, indicating the qualifications required and conditions necessary to proceed: “*The fact that there exists a higher and more secret path of life than that which we normally tread, and that when the outer world and its pursuit and rewards lose their attractiveness for us and prove insufficient to our deeper needs, as sooner or later they will, we are compelled to turn back upon ourselves, to seek and knock at the door of a world within; and it is upon this inner world, and the path to and through it, that Masonry promises light, charts the way, and indicates the qualifications and conditions of progress. This is the sole aim and intention of Masonry*”¹².

¹¹ W. L. Wilmshurst, *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹² W. L. Wilmshurst, *Ibidem*, p. 13.

Wilmshurst underlines how this, the sole aim and intention of Freemasonry, should never be forsaken or overlooked in favour of other moralistic forms of expression. Wilmshurst continues by stating that Freemasonry, which for too many people and for too long a period failed to be deemed as such, has had its energy diverted along previously foreign social and philanthropic channels: “*But because, for long and for many, Masonry has meant less than this, it has not as yet fulfilled its original purpose of being the efficient initiating instrument it was designed to be; its energies have been diverted from its true instructional purpose into social and philanthropic channels, excellent in their way, but foreign to and accretions upon the primal main intention.*”¹³

The definition of Freemasonry as an ‘initiatic instrument’ leaves us in no doubt as to the ‘esoteric’ vision of Wilmshurst, although it is however in the ‘mystical’ connotations he attributed particularly to the Hiramic allegory that, in my opinion, he reaches the peak of his analytical capabilities. On mentioning the ‘death of the body’ referred to in the legend, Wilmshurst underlines how this should be interpreted as the symbolic sign of *rebirth* or *regeneration*, particularly in view of the fact that through *self-discipline* and inner development, the candidate overcomes his shortcomings and attains an immortal ‘incorruptible body’: “*Although distinct reference to the death of the body is made, yet such death is obviously intended to be merely symbolical of another kind of death, since the candidate is eventually restored to his former worldly circumstances and material comforts, and his early Masonic career is not represented as coming to a close at this stage. All that has happened in the third degree is that he has symbolically passed through a great and striking change: a re-birth, or re-generation of his whole nature. He has been “sown a corruptible body”; and in virtue of the self-discipline and self-development he has undergone, there has been raised in him “an*

¹³ W. L. Wilmshurst, *Ibidem*, p.14.

incorruptible body”, and death has been swallowed up in the victory he has attained over himself”¹⁴.

This concept is once again emphasised towards the end of the essay when the Author affirms that solely the ‘Initiatic process’ should be aimed at stimulating and reawakening in candidates a sense of *direct* cognition, irrefutable demonstration of facts and truths he was previously unaware or only notionally informed of; to bring him into direct conscious contact with the *Realities* underlying the surface-images of things, so that, instead of holding merely beliefs or opinions about himself, the Universe and God, he is directly and convincingly confronted with the *Truth*; and finally moves him to become the Good and Truth revealed to him by identifying with the same: “*The purpose of Initiation may be defined as follows: it is to stimulate and awaken the candidate to direct cognition and irrefutable demonstration of facts and truths of his own being about which previously he has been either wholly ignorant or only notionally informed; it is to bring him into direct conscious contact with the Realities underlying the surface-images of things, so that, instead of holding merely beliefs or opinions about himself, the Universe and God, he is directly and convincingly confronted with Truth itself; and finally it is to move him to become the Good and the Truth revealed to him by identifying with it*”.¹⁵ As mentioned, the excerpts cited from Wilmshurst clearly recall the Jungian theories of the process of individuation, theories I will expound on later in the volume.

In referring to the esoteric nature of the symbolic *Three Degrees*, Wilmshurst highlights how the latter enclose all forms of esotericism without any additional notions or superfetations. In passing from one *Grade* to the next *Grade* the candidate is led from an old to an entirely new quality of life; through discipline, he is transformed from a natural being into a perfect, *regenerated* man. To achieve this transmutation and metamorphosis the

¹⁴ W. L. Wilmshurst, *Ibidem*, p.42.

¹⁵ W. L. Wilmshurst, *Ibidem*, p.106.

candidate is taught to purify and develop his mental nature, to finally, surrendering his old life, rise from the dead as a Master, a Perfect Man with vaster consciousness and faculties, an effective instrument in the hands of the Great Architect in his plan to rebuild the Temple of fallen Humanity, capable of initiating and advancing other men to take part in the same great work: “*To sum up the import of the teaching of the three degrees, it is clear, therefore, that from grade to grade the candidate is being led from an old to an entirely new quality of life. He begins his Masonic career as the natural man; he ends it by becoming through its discipline, a regenerated perfected man. To attain this transmutation, this metamorphosis of himself, he is taught first to purify and subdue his sensual nature; then to purify and develop his mental nature; and finally, by utter surrender of his old life and losing his soul to save it, he rises from the dead a Master, a just man made perfect, with larger consciousness and faculties, an efficient instrument for use by the Great Architect in His plan for re-building the Temple of fallen humanity, and capable of initiating and advancing other men to a participation in the same great work*”.¹⁶

However, we then wonder why two key scholars such as Faivre and Riffard would have made such a blatant mistake, assigning a lesser ‘esoteric’ connotation to the first *Three Degrees* of Freemasonry to that conveyed to the ‘Higher Degrees’, and maintaining how the English Freemasonry was essentially devoid of ‘esoteric’ content? There are two reasons for this in my opinion. The first is an *underestimation* of the issue, with Freemasonry frequently being dealt with in a rather ‘smug’ manner, using common stereotypes irrespective of whether or not these are based on fact or correspond to the actual situation. A careful examination of the Anglo Saxon Masonic ‘Rituals’ would undoubtedly have helped the authors to avoid taking up such an unforgiving stance. However, this is where another issue arises:

¹⁶ W. L. Wilmshurst, *Ibidem*, p. 46-47.

the *interpretation* of rituals. Faivre and Riffard were the first to dichotomize and divide the *esoterologists* from the *esotericists*, the former notably ‘study’ *Esotericism* and associated rituals, whilst the latter ‘practice’ the same. However, as already mentioned, on addressing a ritual, the historic approach undertaken by an *esoterologist* is quite different from the ‘exegetic’ approach of the *esotericist*, the sole method capable of ‘revealing’ the hidden content of the ritual. The *esotericist* alone is capable of carrying out the ‘exegetic’ tasks required to achieve an esoteric interpretation of any type of ritual, not only Masonic rituals. Indeed, even on reading a ritual, the *esoterologist*, the scholar of *Esotericism*, may fail to grasp its true significance, its esoteric and initiatic content; regrettably, there is no solution to this problem.

The *esoterologist*, with his historic approach, does not contemplate the presence of *Myth* in his ‘method’, and moreover, does not identify in the various esoteric phenomena the presence of the ‘ideal type’, the “Initiate”, the nature of which and need for an *intimate* and *profound* ‘search’ into his inner self, the result of his ‘vision of the world’, is at the basis of an authentically esoteric phenomenon, the need that witnesses his *birth* and stimulates the initiate to pursue this as his aim.

In this authentically initiatic representation, man is interpreted not with a view to what he is, or seems to be, but rather with a view to what he could *become*, and therefore from the point of view of his possible *evolution*. Indeed, the possibility of achieving an actual change and extending of the human conscience represents the aim of the authentic Wisdom Schools, and the presence of the ‘ideal type’ the “Initiate” is an essential starting point. The “Initiate”, in this case represented by the ‘figure’ of the Freemason, finds his answers within himself, not externally, indeed, the “Master” does not intend to undertake a revolution, but rather to *transform* society by instilling an awakening of the individual, in the *intimate* realms of his conscience. In a world lacking direction, the

”Initiate”, the Freemason, is entrusted with the sacred mission of saving himself, and no form of ideology can elicit this metamorphosis in him. All actions should be undertaken in the Lodge, a territory of the spirit.

In relation to the second motivation, it should be underlined how numerous scholars of Freemasonry with their frequently abstruse theories have proved considerably misleading and complicated a correct comprehension of the same. Regrettably, many of these scholars, of whom I will mention a few, form part of academia. The Dutch historian Wouter Hanegraaff, previously cited several times, provides a somewhat superficial account of Freemasonry, presenting it as a sort of ‘role play’ in which particularly those hailing from the lower social classes are given the opportunity to become ‘for fun, “important and respected persons”’: *“It is certainly true that Freemasons are supposed to make ‘progress’ through their initiations, but there can be no doubt that many of them simply take pleasure in the ‘serious play’ of dressing up in ceremonial costume and performing their well-defined roles in what amounts to a kind of elaborate ritual theatre. The pleasure may be further enchanted by the opportunity of a temporary escape from normal society and its constraints: an individual may well make social (apart from spiritual) progress within the organization of Freemasonry and become an important and generally respected person in the lodge, even if in general society he has a low-status job and lives a mostly boring life”*.¹⁷ This corresponds to a completely false and over-simplified representation of Freemasonry, I would even go as far as calling it offensive, but is above all a misleading portrayal as it does not provide the possibility, to those who would so wish, to truly comprehend the singularities of the phenomenon. Freemasonry, in spite of the critical aspects repeatedly highlighted in this book, still today represents, at least in the intentions of those, numerous, who practice it, an authentic Initiatic school featuring a wealth of

¹⁷ Wouter Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, Bloomsbury, London, 2013, p. 117.

esoteric notions and manifestations. Also, most importantly, throughout the Anglo Saxon world.¹⁸

Amongst the theories portraying a view of Freemasonry which was far removed from reality, I should like to mention the views held by the American historian Margaret Jacob, who has, regrettably, written several books on the topic. Ms Jacob states: “*The constitutional and legislative environment was what attracted men on the Continent to the first lodges. Within their confines Brothers adjudicated new forms of personal power and they could imagine themselves involved in governance as well as opposition*”²; “*Masonic discourse, in whatever Western European language, although permitting the expression of local interests and circumstances, did so within the framework of a rhetoric that was British in origin as well as invariably civic, hence political, and most frequently progressive and reformist*”⁴; “*The central element of Masonic discourse was its intention of acting on a political level*”⁷; “*It is the contention of this book that the Masonic experience in every Western European context – from Edinburgh*

¹⁸ An interesting example is constituted by the works of the *Dormer Masonic Study Circle*, founded in 1938, membership of which is open to all Master Masons belonging to Lodges operating under the jurisdiction of the United Grand Lodge of England or of a recognised Grand Lodge. Its aims are to study the ‘Hidden Mysteries’ of Freemasonry, and in particular its esoteric elements; meetings are held informally once a month (in London). The titles of some of the books published by the Circle highlight how the topics dealt with embrace the entire field of esoteric studies and its association with the Masonic symbology: *The True Freemasonry: Exoteric & Esoteric, Seeking a Master* (A. Cathcart Bruce), *The Raising of the Dead – Freemasonry and the Pauline Doctrine of the “Great Work”*, *The Superphysical World*, *Freemasonry and the Reconstruction of the Spiritual Ideal*, *Masonic Anthropometric Cosmogenesis* (J.R. Cleland), *Freemasonry and the Doctrine of Reincarnation*, *The Kabbalah and Freemasonry* (J.R. Cleland), *Freemasonry and the Message of Aquaria*, *Freemasonry and the Ancient Wisdom*, *The Mystical Quest in freemasonry*, in *Transaction* (1 – 30). *Concerning Belief* (Freemasonry and Spiritual Disciplines (J. R. Cleland), *Raising of Osiris*, *The Spiritual Significance of Some Symbols* (F.V. Mataraly), *Concerning God and Religion*, *The Illumination of the Craft* (W.H. Topley) in *Transaction* (31 – 50). *Freewill and Predestination* (J. R. Cleland), *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Freemasonry* (R.A.L. Harland), in *Transaction* (51 – 70).

² Margaret C. Jacob, *Massoneria illuminata*, Einaudi, Turin, 1995, Pag.5. Original Title: *Living the Enlightenment*, Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe, Oxford University Press, 1991.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

to Berlin, from the 1730s to the 1780s – was resolutely civil, and hence political”⁸. Similar utterances convey a completely distorted and unrealistic view of Freemasonry. These are indeed theories purporting that the origins of Freemasonry are based on ‘political’ undertakings, and the mere possibility that Freemasonry may *also* represent an *Initiatic School* does not even cross the mind of the North-American author. It is clear that throughout all the sentences quoted there is no reference to rituals, to their esoteric or initiatic content, nothing at all. Freemasonry is viewed by Ms. Jacob as nothing more than a purely associationist-political movement, an ‘association’ with exclusively profane aims: “Certain characteristics of Masonic associations differ not at all from the many other private societies that sprang up throughout Europe in the course of the eighteenth century. Members, proposed and chosen by other members, paid dues, attended meetings, voted and discussed, gave loyalty, and sought conviviality, if not self-improvement, from their association”¹¹. These theories, devoid of any firm basis, have unfortunately influenced several scholars who, taking them in good faith, have frequently gleaned elements and cues for the purpose of elaborating further hypotheses, naturally invalidated from the start. One of the better known of these relates to an alleged illuminist origin of Freemasonry.¹⁹

⁸ *Ibidem*, p.27.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p.32.

¹⁹ I devoted to this topic a recent book I wrote *The Influence of Neoplatonic Thought on Freemasonry* (Book Guild Publishing, Sussex, England, 2007), highlighting the fact that if we are to refer to philosophical influences on the origins of the Masonic doctrines, although I would particularly tend to term these ‘contaminations’, then they are undoubtedly to be found more in the Neoplatonic thought (I refer largely to the Cambridge Neoplatonists) than in the context of Illuminist ideals.