ROBERT TEMPLE on a forgotten genius

Coming to grips with Ficino

The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino
by Michael J. B. Allen
University of California Press, £24.00
ISBN 0 520 05152 1

Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer
by Michael J. B. Allen
University of California Press, £30.75
ISBN 0 520 04222 0

MARSILIO Ficino (1433–1499) was one of the intellectual giants of European history. The fact that he is today largely unknown is less a reflection on him than on us. Considering how many people have tried to understand the Italian Renaissance and what made it tick, it is worse than appalling that most investigators have ignored Ficino. For his was the dynamic intellect at the very heart of things. The magnitude of his achievements fully rivals those of da Vinci, though in a different sphere.

For a thousand years, the works of Plato had been unknown in Europe, with a few exceptions (the *Meno* and *Phaedo* and parts of the *Parmenides* and *Timaeus*). But in 1484, Ficino published his Latin translations of the entire works of Plato, which became standard sources right up until the last century. Single-handed, with the Medicis as his patrons, Ficino launched Plato as a major cultural force upon Europe. Cosimo de Medici gave Ficino a palatial villa where Ficino and a large circle of fellow-thinkers set up a new Platonic Academy, in which even the gardens and statues were laid out according to whatever clues could be obtained from the ancient literature about what had existed in ancient Athens at the original Academy. Ficino was the tutor and advisor of Lorenzo de Medici, whom he viewed as a Platonic "philosopher king".

Artists who were directly inspired by Ficino include Botticelli, Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, and Dürer. Ficino even personally supervised the painting of Botticelli's *Primavera*. It was Ficino who coined the phrase "Platonic love", which in a somewhat debased usage entered into daily speech. Traces of Ficino's influence are lying concealed everywhere one turns. As a Catholic priest who was also more or less of a Greek pagan, Ficino had a dramatic and galvanizing effect on Church doctrine. Evolving from Plato a cult of the individual human soul, Ficino wrote about the subject with such vigour that as a direct result, the doctrine of the immortality of the human soul was adopted for the first time as a dogma of the Catholic Church by decree of the Lateran Council in 1512. Some of Ficino's ideas about the soul were radical in the extreme. He wrote that "any rational soul's power is so great that any one soul in a way may be the universe." And even more dramatically: "if you could conceive of any one of the rational souls being destroyed, then you would be, necessarily, conceiving of the destruction of the rest of the souls . . . the consequence of any soul thus perishing would seem . . . to be the downfall of the world's machine".

The extremes to which Ficino postulated the importance of the individual soul thus implied that for a single soul not to be immortal – uncreated and undestroyed – would mean the destruction of the entire Universe. Probably at no time previously in the history of the world had such a strong position been taken as to the worth and importance of the individual person. This was the highest point of what the Jungians call "individuation" in all of philosophy. And those looking for the origins of Protestantism need look no further. Here too we see, as the essential doctrine of the central figure of the Italian Renaissance, the extremes of individualism which gave rise to that very phenomenon of renascence which created the modern Western world.

Many of Ficino's doctrines relating to the soul are to be found in his *Commentary on the Phaedrus*, translated with related texts in Allen's *Phaedran Charioteer* (which refers to Plato's myth of the soul as charioteer). Allen's translations are so lucid and flowing that he makes it seem as if Ficino had written in English. Allen's scholarship is also profound, and he provides a companion volume of learned commentary of his own in his *Platonism of Ficino*, which is stimulating and provocative, though also heavy-going. The novice wishing to approach Ficino should first turn to *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* (Shepheard-Walwyn, 3 vols., £10.00, £7.50, £8.00), an ongoing series of which the fourth volume will appear next year, with eight more to follow into the 1990s. From the *Letters* and then from the *Phaedrus Commentary*, the extraordinary originality of Ficino's mind may be appreciated. As his works become translated into English and French, Ficino is becoming accessible to the non-specialist, and none too soon. It is impossible to understand the Renaissance, and hence the modern world to which it gave birth, without coming to grips with Marsilio Ficino. He was also a doctor, and wrote on medicine, and a brilliant musician who inspired Monteverdi. And he was one of the founders of modern psychology. Perhaps the day will come when his true importance will be widely recognised. In bringing that day closer, Professor Allen has made a noteable contribution.