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# William H.F. Altman, 'Plotinus the Master and the Apotheosis of Imperial Platonism'

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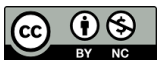
**William H.F. Altman**. *Plotinus the Master and the Apotheosis of Imperial Platonism*. Lexington Books 2024. 472 pp. $145.00 USD (Hardcover 9781666944396); $50.00 USD (eBook 9781666944402).

Altman's volume represents another 'chapter' in the analyses he has carried out in several books devoted to Platonic philosophers, particularly regarding the manner in which such Platonists introduce the contours of their figures and thought into their works. As stated in the "Introduction" (1-28), the book seeks to determine why, despite Plotinus's numerous contradictions, philosophical flaws and fluid approach to his sources, the attitude of modern scholars towards the 'founder' of Neoplatonism is always conciliatory, if not admiring. The author attempts to reconstruct the mechanisms that Plotinus himself wanted to establish in the minds of his followers. Altman also proposes the creation of an interpretive category: this is termed *Imperial Platonism*, which is defined not in the conventional historiographical sense of the Platonism that consolidated in the 1st-3rd centuries CE, but rather as the Platonism that consciously justifies power (the rule of Rome), a doctrine promoted by Plotinus.

The volume is divided into seven chapters, with an extensive bibliography (ranging from basic books and articles on Plotinus and Platonism to doctoral theses and even conferences—as well as the discussions that followed such meetings) and a useful index of names. The dense volume addresses a plethora of subjects and themes: the purpose of this review is to provide a summary of the core of each chapter, with particular reference to the two overarching issues explored in the book, Plotinus's portrayal in modern scholarship and the characteristics of his Platonism.

In the first chapter, "Plotinus the Master" (29-74), Altman analyses the fundamental difference between the roles of 'master/disciple' and 'teacher/student'. The first dyad conveys a hierarchical aspect of a top-down relationship that compels the listener to accept any thesis introduced into the discussion as an unquestionable expression of truth. On the contrary, teachers disseminate philosophical messages to their students, fostering autonomous thought, devoid of any sense of subordination to their teachers. This dichotomy becomes evident when one contemplates the self-contradictions inherent within the writings of Plotinus and Plato. Plato deliberately contradicts himself with the pedagogical aim of prompting the audience to formulate independent judgments. Plotinus deliberately contradicts himself, but to emphasize the fact that it is impossible to 'see' and 'touch' the ineffable principle of reality as Plotinus did; consequently, the audience—including contemporary interpreters for Altman—are put into the psychological state of thinking of Plotinus



as an extraordinary individual.

In the second chapter, "Porphyry the Disciple" (75-125), the author focuses on Porphyry's *Vita Plotini* and its fundamental 'critical moment': the *Vita Plotini* devotes some space to Longinus and his attacks against Plotinus; there is even a subliminal devaluation of Plotinus's oldest disciple Amelius, which may reflect Porphyry's enmity with his co-fellow, a rivalry that Plotinus himself may have encouraged. With regard to Longinus, Altman perceives him as the antithesis of Plotinus and his Platonism: indeed, Longinus, unlike Plotinus, was capable of discerning the distinction between different philosophical traditions and held divergent philosophical views from 'Plotinism' (especially on the place of intelligible entities); moreover, he supported not the 'official' imperial authority as Plotinus allegedly did, but the rebel Zenobia. In other words, Longinus was a challenge to Plotinus's Imperial Platonism.

The third chapter, "Porphyry's Successors" (125-176), sets out to identify the reasons why Plotinus's success and unquestioned image as the perfect philosopher had become entrenched both in his immediate successors and, above all, in modern scholarship. According to the author, there was an apologetic tendency, stemming from the way the *Vita Plotini* itself was written, to rehabilitate the figure of Plotinus in the face of his self-contradictions and those philosophical arguments that were open to criticism: for Altman, this tendency underwent a pivotal shift during the 'Vandoeuvres-Géneve' meeting, a conference on Plotinus held at the end of the 1950s by some eminent scholars, who then consolidated an attractive account of Plotinus. Many of these scholars, as the author notes, were inspired by French and Irish Catholicism: their personal devotion perhaps left some traces in the way they elevated Plotinus as someone who entered into mystical communion with the divine.

The fourth chapter, "Imperial Platonism and the Gnostics" (177-232), analyses Plotinus's attitude towards the Gnostics, particularly in the light of their relationship with imperial authority. The author emphasizes the anti-imperial dimension of Gnostic Platonism: indeed, its anti-cosmic orientation means, in a Roman Empire where everyone would say "Rome is the world", that Rome is evil, since Rome has come to dominate an evil dimension, the known cosmos, created by an ignorant and evil Demiurge. The fact that Plotinus strongly opposed the Gnostics, and that his Platonism was intended to support imperial authority, further confirms that the Gnostics were anti-Roman.

The fifth chapter, "Pierre Hadot and the Real Plotinus" (233-291), focuses on Pierre Hadot's

interpretation of Plotinus as a rationalist who firmly believed that intelligence could give human beings access to divine knowledge. In this reconstruction, Hadot sees Plotinus as a paradigm of virtue and a spiritual leader driven by love of beauty and the divine: this interpretation of a 'lovable Plotinus' may reflect Hadot's personal life, when he married his second wife. The author also synoptically reconstructs the analyses on Plotinus by Alexander J. Mazur, who emphasized Plotinus's similarities with the Gnostics and did not fall into the temptation of presenting Plotinus as a 'master'. Finally, the author suggests that Hadot's portrayal of Plotinus was perhaps inspired by the philosophical milieu of his French intellectual environment, with the success of Bergson and Heidegger.

The sixth chapter, "Plotinus on Plato's One" (293-318), analyses the ways in which Plotinus reappraises and develops Plato's concept of the One to show that he is not a true interpreter of Plato, but rather an *exegetes* in the Greek and religious sense of the word, that is, a revealer of hidden and unfathomable truths. Plotinus thinks that Plato's One coincides with the Idea of the Good, but he does not argue in favor of such an interpretation: he merely assumes it. Furthermore, Plotinus reshaped earlier philosophical traditions by over-interpreting them out of their original context: for the sake of his system, Plotinus ignored and suppressed counter-indications to other interpretations of his sources.

Finally, the seventh chapter, "The Rhetorical Apotheosis of Imperial Platonism" (355-404), considers Plotinus's rhetoric, a subject that has received limited attention in modern scholarship. According to the author, scholars have confined themselves to general praise of Plotinus's quotations from traditional poets and his extensive use of evocative metaphors. However, Altman notes that Plotinus seems to be particularly concerned with *dispositio*, that is, with the ways in which a discourse or argument can be arranged to effectively persuade the audience. Above all, Plotinus is aware that in the *Enneads* he can help to shape his own image as a holy man who has acquired the highest truths: as such, he describes the first principle of his metaphysics with numerous self-contradictions; these serve as communication strategies to present Plotinus as the inspired poet of Plato's *Ion*, fully imbued with divine powers inexpressible by human words, with the effect of enchanting his audience and drawing all attention to him as a spiritual leader; this is the exact opposite of Plato 'the teacher', who hides himself in the dialogues to place the audience at the center of philosophical self-development.

From the point of view of the history of philosophy, the book's notable strength lies in its

provision of novel, and in certain instances significant, interpretations of select passages from the *Enneads* and Plotinus's philosophical concepts, which are studied in the light of their historical context: this is especially the case with the analyses of Plotinus's political philosophy and the emphasis on his involvement with the imperial court. However, sometimes the arguments put forward by the author in support of his theses should be more reliable and more in line with the usual requirements of academic monographs: for example, his frequent recourse to discussions held during conferences involving the author, the audience and the speakers, which do not constitute sources that can be consulted by the readers of the book. From the point of view of the history of historiography, the volume pursues an intriguing 'anthropological' perspective, namely the need to take into account the personal lives of modern scholars—in addition to their academic environment and intellectual training—in order to determine the reason for one's interpretation, even though the risks of approaching *ad hominem* accusations are high: for example, considering the second marriages and divorces of scholars as having an impact on the way they interpreted—or else, praised—certain Plotinian themes such as love and union. Above all, the volume has the merit of conveying a general message with ethical and political implications: it is important not to enthusiastically accept those who present themselves as authoritative and charismatic figures, but to independently criticize what they say and what they show, so as not to fall victim, willingly or unconsciously, to the psychological mechanisms they seek to instill in their audience, namely unconditional admiration. In this regard, according to Altman, Plotinus the master, the founder of Imperial Platonism, did not remain faithful to whom he considered to be his spiritual master, the founder of Platonism proper, Plato the teacher.

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