Altman, W. (2020) *Ascent to the Beautiful: Plato the Teacher and the Pre-Republic Dialogues from Protagoras to Symposium*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020.

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This book is the conclusion of a series, *Plato the Teacher*, initiated in 2012 with a homonymous work on Plato's *Republic*. Published after four other volumes – the whole series exceeds two thousand pages – it is intended nevertheless to be read first. In five chapters and seventeen sections – plus preface, introduction, and epilogue – it deals with nine dialogues prior to the *Republic*: *Protagoras, Alcibiades Major, Alcibiades Minor, Lovers, Hippias Major, Hippias Minor, Ion, Menexenus and Symposium*. "Prior" is understood here not in the sense of the alleged order in which Plato wrote his dialogues, but in the sense of a reading order: Altman claims that Plato designed these dialogues to be read first, for they are relatively simple and serve to introduce the reader/student to Platonism.

Altman's whole project, magnificently mirrored by this book, depends heavily on the idea that Plato wrote his dialogues to be taught. Since Plato was a teacher and his dialogues are eminently teachable – he argues in his *Curricular Hypothesis* (Preface xv)– it is likely that they were somehow read, discussed, and taught in the Academy. The goal of Altman's project is to present a possible order in which this teaching process was (and still possibly is) carried out. Thus, the image of Plato as a teacher of turbulent and talented adolescents is persuasively hammered throughout the book. Plato is neither a professor nor a mystic, but rather a playful, humorous, and very humane teacher. Predicated on the idea that Plato needed to entertain in order to capture the attention of his audience (Preface, xx), Altman considers the purpose of these dialogues within an amusing and encyclopedic structure. He uses a concept operational since Schleiermacher and sees them as *Jugenddialoge,* but the meaning of *Jugend* shifts from a compositional to a pedagogical perspective: they are

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not youthful because Plato wrote them earlier in his career, but because they were composed for youngsters (p. 125; 210). Altman often goes into detail and discusses at length the reception of the dialogues, exhibiting an enviable erudition, albeit he is primarily focused on the connections between these works and the big curricular picture they create. His new authenticity principle – "a dialogue is authentic when it fits snugly, in accordance with sound pedagogical principles, between other two" (Preface, xxii) – saves from excision all the dialogues transmitted as genuine by Thrasyllus.

The chapter on *Protagoras* develops the idea embraced by Guthrie, Snell, and other scholars (p. 35) that this dialogue was designed to be staged. Altman emphasizes the theatrical features of the dialogue – the movement of the chorus, the furniture, the internal applause (p. 43-48) etc. – but his real goal is to interpret *Protagoras* as the gateway of Plato's curriculum. Plato gives us some hints to think so: the emphasis on the word gateway (θύρα) (p. 50); the ideal story overture of a before dawn scenario (p. 31); the elementary presentation of the most brilliant minds of that time (p. 35); Socrates' descent into the cave (p. 39); and, finally, the important fact that *Protagoras,* in some way or another, anticipates or alludes to every of Plato's dialogues (p. 37). However, the idea that *Protagoras* comes first in the reading order is not obvious, since its undeniable difficulty invalidates the pedagogical principle (Preface, xxii) that simpler dialogues should precede harder ones. Altman argues nevertheless that *Protagoras* is the best example of Plato's proleptic pedagogy: "it effectively confuses the student on matters of critical importance, whetting their interest without satisfying it, and creating the kind of wonder that all the great Socratics used to educate their audience (…) (p. 36)". Therefore, he proposes that the student should "see" *Protagoras* more than one time and after the study of other works: it would illuminate its content every time the student returns to it.

In Chapter Two (The Elementary Dialogues), Altman analyses the *Alcibiades* dyad and the *Lovers* and shows how they change the interpretation of the *Protagoras:* they begin with what Altman calls the Reversal of the *Protagoras* and, consequently, they indicate that Plato deliberately erred in this dialogue (p. 142). Given due to ancient theories that put *Alcibiades* at the beginning of the reading order, Altman argues that *Alcibiades Major* follows the *Protagoras* because, among other reasons, the youngster Alcibiades uses an argument he learnt with Protagoras the other day: Alcibiades claims that he knows what justice is, for he has learnt it from the many in the same way people usually learn their native language (p. 27). In the *Introduction*, a deep discussion with Schleiermacher and other scholars proved the importance of *Alcibiades Major* for Altman's view (p. 2). *Alcibiades Major* is where Plato begins the deconstruction of the εὖ πράττειν fallacy embraced by Socrates, i.e., that one can slide from to do [things] well to fare well. Altman criticizes the Socratists (Vlastos, Penner and Rowe) who use Aristotle's testimony to find in the *Protagoras* a historical Socrates for whom the practice of justice makes you happier and is also more pleasant than its opposite (p. 143). According to the author, just as the problem of the One and the Many is the Ariadne's thread to guiding us through the difficulties of the post-*Republic* dialogues, so too the εὖ πράττειν fallacy is the best guide to disclose the meaning of the pre-*Republic* series. This fallacy reappears in the *Republic*'s Shorter Way (p. 164) and contradicts the fact the Guardians must return to the Cave not because this is good, pleasant, or beneficial for

them, but because they act in accordance with Justice. Thus, *Alcibiades Major* proves that there is a gulf between the καλῶς πράττειν – namely, the courageous willingness to face death and wounds for the sake of our friends – and the individualist view of an εὖ πράττειν in which one does what is advantageous for him (p. 154). It dismisses Alcibiades' egoistic view in accordance both with Socrates' *Heldentod* and the proverbial χαλεπὰ τὰ καλά.

As for the *Alcibiades Minor*, it is a gymnastic dialogue where Plato teaches a logical lesson that contradicts *Protagoras*' principle that each thing has only one opposite (*Prt.* 139b11; 332c8-9) (p.186). It also contributes thereby to the Reversal of the *Protagoras*. But it is important as well because it teaches crucial facts about theology, and it captivates the attention of Plato's readers through the love affair between Socrates and Alcibiades. For Altman, Plato has excited from the outset the curiosity of his teenager students about the nature of this relationship, and the culmination of this pedagogic trick will be found in *Symposium's* most vivid speech (p. 189-9). Before that, however, there is a small dialogue that fits snugly into this problematic: although its discussion of πολυμαθία points to the *Hippias* dyads, it is the discussion of the μεταξύ that both makes the *Lovers* indispensable and contributes to save it from excision, let alone the fact that its title clearly alludes to the aforementioned affair. It also suggests the deliberate error of *Protagoras*' one-thing-one-opposite principle and emphasizes a crucial term for the description of Love and philosophy in the *Symposium*.

Chapter Three is devoted to *Hippias Major* and contains an interesting discussion of reading order and authenticity. Two points must be underlined about Altman's views on authenticity. His argument on the simple dialogues that have raised the harshest philological suspicion seems very original and persuasive: those dialogues, such as the *Lovers,* illustrate Plato's generosity as a teacher, for they patiently instruct and playfully entertain the readers (p. 209). In most cases, they were taken to be inauthentic because of their very simplicity – and they are indeed simple, if a professor reads them, but they can be incredibly challenging for a neophyte. Second, if we consider the testimony of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, according to which Plato was working in his dialogues and tinkering them with details until the very end (Preface, xvii), it is likely to assume that they must always be read in the context of their neighbors, especially in the case of doubtful dialogues (p. 225). The *Echtheitskritik* of individual dialogues (or letters) loses the larger structures that Plato created until his last breath through thematic, dramatic, and pedagogic parallels (p. 215).

As to the *Hippias Major,* Altman takes it as Plato's *pons asinorum*, for it prepares the student in every possible way to comprehend the *Symposium*: "it is the necessary and well-designed literary, pedagogical, and ontological preparation for the Diotima-discourse in *Symposium,* and thus for the 'great ocean of Beauty' (*Smp.* 210d4) that we will see from its mountain peak (p. 239)". This is written at the very core of the book, section 9, which is also the most breathtaking one. Undoubtedly funny, *Hippias Major* is nonetheless a difficult dialogue, for it forces the reader to abandon his allegiance to the sensible world (p. 239). By jettisoning the equation between χρήσιμον and καλόν – the first one is always relative (πρός), whereas the second is in itself (αὐτό) –, it not only anticipates *Symposium's* Idea of Beauty, the last scale in the first ascent, but also the disjunction of ὠφέλιμον and Good that appears in the *Republic* (247-250). Moreover, *Hippias Major* is crucial because it reveals Plato's deliberate use of deception:

Socrates' Double shows that Plato intends to teach the truth and concomitantly to test the reader about the false (p. 270). This is what Altman calls "basanistic", namely, the testing element of the dialogues that is used by Plato as a pedagogic tool (p. 277). *Hippias Major* teaches that Socrates can be deceptive and, simultaneously, it increases the confidence of the student by telling him a joke about Socrates' Double that the "wise" Hippias does not get. In doing it, Plato also entertains the juvenile sensibility of his students (p. 269). Such a reading is an example of the fact that, for Altman, the dialogue between Plato and the reader is at the heart of his ideas (p. 276).

Chapter Four (The Musical Dialogues) deals with *Hippias Minor, Ion, and Menexenus*, all of them are somehow related both to poetry and rhetoric. In the first work, Plato teaches the reader how to read Homer and, consequently, how to read his own dialogues (p. 288). The same concern is present in the *Ion,* which forces the reader to think about Homer's intention (διάνοια) and to continue the exercise of poetry interpretation begun in the *Protagoras* (p. 298). In addition, *Hippias Minor* deals with deception and depicts a Socrates who undermines the most Socratic ethical tenet, exposed in the *Protagoras*, that no one errs voluntarily. By deliberately misinterpreting Homer, and preferring Odysseus to Achilles, Plato creates what Altman calls the Aristotelian Paradox: the reader must choose between the Aristotelian version of Socrates or rejecting Aristotle's own testimony that the Hippias Minor is genuine. Furthermore, the discussion of the techniques, which describes them as morally neutral – they can be used for good and bad purposes as well – suggests that the reader must confront Aristotle's version of Socrates, according to which Plato's teacher defended that virtue is knowledge (p. 295). The Reversal of the Protagoras is again *en marche.*

The *Ion* underlines the centrality of Homer to the understanding of Plato's dialogues. The minimum that it accomplishes is to transform the reader into a eulogist of Homer (p. 335): it invites the reader to break the the silence that Socrates imposes on Ion, and to say "many fine things" about Homer, especially about the *Litai* just evoked in the *Hippias Minor*. In the discussion of the secondary literature, Altman restores the beauty and importance of this small dialogue and shows that deadpan readings of it miss several relevant points, such as the fact the Ion is not as brainless and full of himself as he appears, since he is outside of himself when he recites, and is able, like Proteus, to become other people (p. 327).

Although *Menexenus* is the subject of the last section, its real meaning is analyzed in the chapter devoted to the *Symposium,* where Altman shows that its deliberate falsifications of Athenian history constitute both an invitation for the student to read the three great historians (Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon) and a revelation of the tragic temper of *Symposium*, staged on the verge of the Sicilian Expedition. Here, Altman draws attention to other features of the dialogue. For example, the fact that Plato is teaching us rhetoric throughout, since the *Protagoras* and the *Alcibiades Major* (p. 351), and that in this dialogue he deploys the rhetoric of wartime heroism to remind his students of what ἀρετή in action looks like" (p. 369). *Menexenus* also introduces another major pedagogic trick that pops up in the Symposium, namely, what Altman calls *Socrates schooled*. Depicted as someone who is ignorant but wants to learn, Socrates teaches the students how to learn and, more important, that there is no shame in being taught (p. 253).

Chapter Five is solely dedicated to the *Symposium*, and Altman shows now how several themes of the preceding dialogues are

addressed in a new light or finally solved. The silent characters of *Protagoras*, Agathon, e.g., now deliver speeches of their own (p. 377); the ability to memorize speeches, once represented by Ion, reappears with Apollodorus (p. 378); the affair of Socrates and Alcibiades reaches its climax (p. 396); etc. *Symposium* and *Protagoras* are the bookends of a series and, therefore, they refer to each other in many possible ways: two journeys to different houses that begin with a "let us go"; Flute Girls sent away; allusions in both works to their gathering as συνουσία and the word συμπόσιον; descriptions of conversations that the readers are not allowed to hear etc. (p. 395). Leaving aside the lesson on the Beautiful, *Symposium* is really about speeches and depends therefore on *Menexenus.* The main connection between them is the absent guest in the former: the Sicilian Expedition. By showing how the reading of Xenophon and Thucydides is primordial to Plato (p. 355), Altman proves that *Symposium* itself carries out its final challenge: it is both a comedy and a tragedy (p. 401).

As for the Beautiful, Altman argues that Diotima deceives the reader as she reinterprets Phaedrus' speech and claims that Achilles, Alcestis and Codrus died for the sake of fame, not because of a willingness to help their beloved ones (p. 429). The idea, then, is to read again Phaedrus's speech and realize that Diotima partly acts as a sophist (p. 431). This fact also proves that Achilles, contrary to what the deceitful Socrates defended in the *Hippias Minor*, is better than Odysseus, for he chose to die for his beloved in the same way Socrates will die for Athens (p. 447). Therefore, Altman criticizes the eudaemonist reading of the *Symposium* that accepts "the Symposium Substitution" and the Equation of the Good and the Beautiful at 204e, also presented in *Protagoras*' final argument. For Altman, the reader must reject this substitution and see ἔρως as a power that makes us able to nurture virtue and to sacrifice ourselves for the others (p. 455).

Two other aspects of this book and its companions must be mentioned, although briefly. First, Altman often deploys other Greek authors to confirm his ideas. For him, Plato not only depended on the survival of Thucydides, Homer, and Xenophon, but he also learned with them how to compose his immortal dialogues. Xenophon provided several literary strategies that Plato employs: Plato's Socrates schooled has an analogue, for instance, in *Oeconomicus,* and the hunt for Alcibiades in *Protagoras* is better understood with the aid of *Cynegeticus* and its critique of sophistry (p. 67). Posterior authors, allegedly Plato's students, also confirm some of Altman's positions. In many passages he brings up the minor Attic orators, such as Lycurgus and Hesperides, to illustrate Platonic ideas, let alone the still unorthodox thesis that Demosthenes was Plato's student. For Altman, they all embraced the eminently political lesson of the Academy and returned to the Cave of political life.

In the Epilogue, Atlmans indulges in imagining what the Academy was like. He stresses the fact that, given the lack of sound historical evidence, his description of the Academy is as speculative as those of his adversaries (p. 481). He then depicts how a typical freshman, like Hippocrates, would watch *Protagoras* in his first year, and would then see it again at the start of each new academic year, after having read and studied other dialogues (p. 484). At the end, he would be able to see the dialogue for what it really stands for. Although speculative, Altman's attempt at imagining the Academy is incredibly valuable: breaking the image of Plato the professor that scholarship has, as it were, uncritically assumed for centuries, he makes us conscious of a myriad of non-discussed subjects that, in one way or another, happen

to shape most of our interpretations. His Plato the teacher often seems more plausible than the image that tradition offers.

The main problem with Altman's creative hypothesis is not the lack of historical evidence, but the deadpan reading of the *Protagoras* that, according to him, Aristotle embraced. As briefly mentioned above, Aristotle took *Protagoras* literally and defined the positions that the "historical Socrates" would have endorsed. However, if the dialogues are so capable of teaching deception, prolepsis, basanistic pedagogy and so on, how would it be possible that Aristotle never understood them properly? Apparently, this is a one of two possibilities: either Aristotle was too blockheaded to understand the *Protagoras,* even after he watched it repeatedly, or Altman's hypothesis must be somehow improved. In fact, Altman provides an answer that could serve here as well: for him, some students, and Aristotle is the best example, did not want to cross the bridge of Platonism in *Hippias Major* and separate the forms with all consequences it involves, such as the rejection of the Equation of the Good and the Beautiful. They simply refused the *pons* Plato generously offered them (p. 244).

Despite this, the book is elegant, undoubtedly erudite, and captivates the reader in a way that he becomes eager to see the next scenes of the bigger story Altman is telling. Therefore, it is effective as the first book of a long series on Plato. Even the readers who do not accept Altman's critical rejection of the order of composition paradigm (the majority of them, I suspect), can profit from his perspicacious ideas on Plato. More important, for the ones who are interested in teaching the dialogues, this book and the series to which it belongs present a creative and sound reading order that certainly benefit non-isolationist interpretations of Plato.