

Favorite Translation of Lucretius

Post by “Joshua” of January 26, 2023 at 6:56 PM

Very much right, [Pacatus!](#)

The Homeric Question will never have a satisfactory answer, but the growing consensus suggests an intimate relationship between Iliad, Odyssey, and the oral tradition of bardic singers from which those two great works arose. The Odyssey actually describes two such singers. People are capable of incredible memorization when they put their minds to it. I frequently encounter people--and quite ordinary people at that--who have hours and hours of song lyrics tucked away in their minds.

Songs are somewhat easier to remember than prose. They have a clear structure, sometimes a rhyme scheme, and very often a lot of repetition, whether in the lyrics of the chorus or in the melody of the verses.

Homer's epics were also meant to be remembered, in whole or in part, and to be performed by singers at court or in public. To help them remember, the epic verse has structure, in the form of its dactylic hexameter, and it has repetition. Most of the repetition is in the form of Homeric epithets; instead of saying Achilles, he writes "swift footed Achilles". Each main character has their epithets. "Lord of men Agamemnon", "Hector tamer of horses", and so on. The really central characters will have several epithets. This is important because the chosen epithet must match the hexameter of the line he plugs it into.

There may have been some improvisation involved in the very early period. A singer who knew the story of the war and also knew a number of stock phrases and epithets might well decide to play to his audience. All of these characters came from Greek places. If a singer was entertaining in Ithaca, he might choose to lay it on thick for the locals when he was describing the exploits of Odysseus, their native son.

All of this had changed by Lucretius' time. He wasn't writing a poem to be recited aloud to the song of the lyre. He was writing a philosophical poem, meant to be read deeply and repeatedly until his audience really got the point. He still uses hexameter, and he uses epithets for form's sake--"mother of the Aeneads", "Mars mighty in battle"--but he's not writing a story about the adventures of men and gods. He doesn't expect his verses to be sung at lavish parties. He describes himself working late at night, by lamp or candle light, penning his lines. The process is long, laborious, and sometimes tedious. The hexameter is difficult and unyielding. If he can't make this one line work, he'll have to backtrack, and rework the preceding 3 or 4 lines. It is a devilishly intricate art, sometimes more like playing chess than writing--you have to be able to see a few moves ahead, or you write yourself into a corner.

So why the repetition? Here are some reasons.

- He thought it was exceptionally good. The yellow honey on the rim of the wormwood cup is one example of this. Those lines form basically his mission statement for the whole poem, and may be worth repeating to reinforce the point. "I know this stuff may not be easy to hear, but it really will help you. Just hear me out."
- He was writing on the same subject and it was easier to repeat the same lines. Virgil is guilty of this--there are lines from his *Georgics* that are repeated in his *Aeneid*. Or Norman DeWitt, who wrote several articles before he wrote his book. It's easier to adapt the articles into the book than to rewrite those sections.
- The repetition came long after he was dead. This is evidently true of the lines on the gods in Book I. It is thought that those lines were copied into the margin of Book I by a scribe from later in the poem. The scribes who followed him then moved those lines into the body of the text. Now we read them there, where the poet never intended to put them.

It may not be possible to know all of the answers.