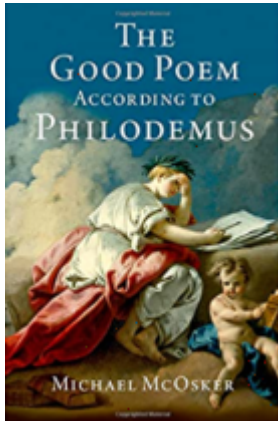


Introduction---Joshua's Notes on "The Good Poem According to Philodemus", by Michael McOsker

Post by "Joshua" of February 7, 2022 at 10:47 PM



Introduction:

It's high time I got my nose in to the Philodemus material--and what better subject for me to begin with than poetry!

I do not have (and am not likely to read) Philodemus' five books *On Poetry* themselves--the difficulties with the Herculaneum papyri are quite staggering, and that work (under the heading of the *Philodemus Translation Series*) is still being published in several expensive volumes--but I am delighted to be going through Dr. Michael McOsker's recently-published and expanded dissertation on the same subject. His advisor in this work was Dr. Richard Janko, one translator of those books by Philodemus I mentioned a moment ago.

As [Don](#) has done us good service in his chapter-by-chapter [review](#) of "Epicurus and His Philosophy" by Norman DeWitt, I decided to follow the same formula.

Notes:

-There is a short preface; the author notes that *On Poetry* is one of the two most studied works in Herculaneum, alongside Epicurus' *On Nature*. He mentions the love of classicists for poetry, and the prejudice among academics toward Epicureanism as two of the reasons for this. Interestingly, he suggest that this prejudice is 'largely abandoned'.

-Describes Philodemus as *epigonos*, a disciple or follower of Epicurus.

-Two goals in this work; first, to look into Philodemus' poetics. In 'far second place', to consider his poetics in light of Epicurean philosophy.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2390-introduction-joshua-s-notes-on-the-good-poem-according-to-philodemus-by-michael/?postID=16649#post16649>

Now onto the introduction itself. I will try to refrain from writing an outline, and stick instead to the features of interest...

Quote

The aesthetic works [on poetry, music, and rhetoric] are not technical manuals, but are about beliefs and attitudes toward their topics.

This appears to me to be consonant with the approach of the early Epicureans, and may go to shed some light on a few of Epicurus' fragmentary quotations. Of particular interest is the question of how we got from Epicurus' style imitating Euclid, to Lucretius' style imitating Empedocles (*wait your turn, Sedley!*)

Quote

[Philodemus] first summarized the views of an opponent...then refuted them.

Philodemus' attitude here is polemical; and we may see this same method at work in Lucretius, where he summarized other philosophers' explanation of natural phenomena and then tears down those explanations one by one. We may infer from the titles of the lost works of the early Epicureans that this polemical style was there from the beginning.

Quote

Nowhere is there a trace of the modern "principle of charity" [when interpreting what his opponents meant], except in discussions of earlier Epicureans, who could write no wrong.

The question has come up on the forum whether Philodemus' books should be considered canon. McOsker appears to find him far too deferential to his predecessors, which may be of note. This is immediately followed by a brief excursion into the *prolepsis*, which McOskar sees as central to one of Philodemus' polemical methods. In other words, if the opponent does not even know what they mean by their words, which we must interpret with our "first understanding", we can reject the opponent as confused.

Quote

[on the structure of the books] A movement from small to large, or most detailed to most global, is easily discernible.

If I read this aright, it is in contrast to what DeWitt identifies as Epicurus' *synoptic* approach, where the broad strokes of the topic are laid out and the details are filled in later.

Quote

...it is somewhat mystifying that Philodemus does not discuss Plato at all and that Stoics get so little attention. I will suggest later that Philodemus is mopping up opinions that were not handled by other members of the school, i.e. Metrodorus, Zeno of Sidon, or Demetrius Laco.

An interesting idea, which I look forward to hearing more about!

Quote

...Philodemus' opinion that poetry is an inappropriate medium for teaching because of its lack of clarity.

One of the reasons we must compare translations when reading Lucretius. It has been proposed that Lucretius substituted Iphianassa for Iphigenia to fit the meter of the poem. There are many other examples of this, where he coins words or uses archaic forms in order to get around a poetic problem.

Quote

It is a little unusual to have a section in one's introduction about the conclusions of the work...

Not for an Epicurean! This is the *synoptic* view at work in McOskar's own book.

However, I will not review his conclusions here, apart from one; let us come to them in good time!

That one is this;

Quote

...Philodemus did have an account of poetry and its workings...and he probably took it over from an earlier Epicurean (Metrodorus, as I suggest [later])

A tantalizing prospect! in getting to know Philodemus' views *On Poetry*, it is possible we are catching a glimpse of a lost work by Metrodorus. A good enough reason to proceed, if we had no other!

...But that's enough for now. There is more to the Introduction, including a long bit on Canonics which will be worth reviewing---next time!