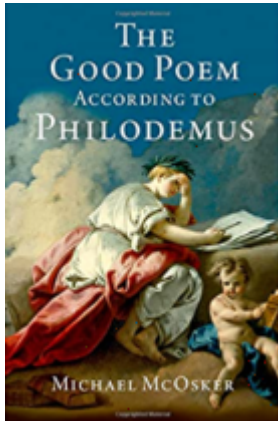


Introduction---Joshua's Notes on "The Good Poem According to Philodemus", by Michael McOsker

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.

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!

Post by “Joshua” of February 7, 2022 at 11:02 PM

As I flip through the pages, I notice that toward the middle of the book we start getting into hefty blocks of Greek text (although there are passages of Greek throughout). So I'm happy to see that there will be a 'flavor' of Philodemus' writing here, at least.

Post by “Don” of February 7, 2022 at 11:34 PM

We have Janko's book in the library. I'll have to check on this one, [Joshua](#).

Post by “Pacatus” of November 1, 2022 at 5:16 PM

[Joshua](#)

The cost of the book is too rich for my wallet at this time; my public membership at the local university library expired during our rigorous social distancing during the covid surge - maybe time to resurrect it.

The blurb on Amazon says, in part:

“His [Philodemus'] main critical principle is that **form and content are inseparable and mutually-reinforcing: a change in one means a change in the other. The poet uses this marriage of form and content to create the psychological effect of the poem in the audience.** This effect is hard to pin down exactly. **Poems produce "additional thoughts" in the audience, and these entertain them. It seems clear that Philodemus expected good poets to arrange form and content suggestively,** so that the poems could exert a lasting pull on the minds of the audience.”

It seems to be akin to a couple of my own poetic principles, such as a notion I borrowed from the Rastafarians: that of “word-sound-power” - along with imagery, metaphor and rhythm. And this:

“The purpose of art is washing the dust of daily life off our souls.” - Pablo Picasso

I have just recently been dipping into Philodemus' epigrammatic poems, which are richly erotic. (And I have thus far made one attempt at rendering one of his into a more modern lyric form – with my own poetic proclivities.) As I read the free sample of McOsker on Amazon, I note that Philodemus rejected didactic poetry on Epicurean grounds, and thought that poetry need not be useful (at least philosophically) to be good. Philodemus advocated prolepsis as a criterion for determining the worth of a poem, though McOsker says he did not rely on that alone. He did insist that a good poem has “meaning” – which I would associate with its intended effect on the reader/listener. (But I do think that the “meaning” of a poem can be – even, most often, is – multiplex, and the reader is a collaborator of sorts on that.

Philodemus' criterion for a good poem is pleasure. I tend mostly to agree (though I sometimes write darker, Poe-esque verse).

Any thoughts, friend poet? ☐☐

Post by “Pacatus” of November 1, 2022 at 5:27 PM

[Joshua](#)

I would also welcome your critical comments on my attempted (modern/lyric) rendering of the Lysidike poem (again, with my own free poetic proclivities) here, before I put it anywhere else: [Philodemus' Poetry](#)

Thanks again.

Post by “Joshua” of November 2, 2022 at 12:42 PM

Ha! Another book I didn't get too far in. I'll try to get back into this. And yes, I will examine your rendition of that poem, [Pacatus](#)

Post by “Pacatus” of November 2, 2022 at 12:48 PM

No worries! 😊 I seldom am able these days to read anything of length straight through, but go at things in a piecemeal and patchwork fashion (that sounds better than “fragmented”

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

😊) -- I haven't even finished DeWitt yet.

Thanks Joshua.