

Janko, R., *Philodemus On Poems Book One*, Pp. xvi + 591, 2 figs., 21 plates, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2000. Hardback, £75. ISBN: 0-19-815041-5.

This volume is the first fruit of the Philodemus Translation Project, which involves David Armstrong, Jeff Fish, Constantina Romeo, James Porter and Richard Janko, and is dedicated to the editing and publication of the aesthetic works of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC Epicurean philosopher and poet Philodemus of Gadara. Forthcoming volumes are to include two further volumes of *On Poems*, and also *On Rhetoric*, and *On Music*. Dirk Obbink's edition of Philodemus *On Piety*, Part One appeared in 1996, and Part Two is expected from OUP in 2003. So Janko's (J.) book is part of an extraordinary and very valuable resurgence of scholarship on Philodemus and the Herculaneum papyri.

J. tells us of the great difficulty of his task in producing this edition at the beginning of his preface (v), where, after quoting Siegfried Sudhaus' 1890 exhortation to the reconstruction and deciphering of the Herculaneum papyri, he writes:

Then, as now, the task was Herculean: editing what are probably the most damaged, disordered, and difficult fragments to survive from classical antiquity.

A little later, on the restoration of *Philodemus On Poems Book One* itself (vi):

The relative ordering of its fragments was a nightmarish task, truly the hardest that I have ever attempted (apart from establishing their absolute order!). It recalled to me the study of archaeological stratigraphy, with which it shares the need to think in three dimensions; just as in sorting, strewing, and joining potsherds, one matches them up by shape and decoration, so too I had to develop practical techniques for matching fragments. I had to make a model of the roll in which I could constantly reorder the pieces, study a vast range of material outside my previous experience, and question constantly my every assumption, however obvious it appeared.

The restoration of the books was so difficult that no one person seemed likely to have all the knowledge, or the time needed for its completion; a collective enterprise by a variety of experts was called for. To this end I organized the Philodemus Translation Project, to edit and translate the three aesthetic works of Philodemus – *On Poems*, *On Rhetoric*, and *On Music*.

J.'s stress on the physical fragmentation of the text, and the consequent three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle of its reconstruction, is well placed, as he shows in the first four chapters, in which he gives a fascinating history of the Herculaneum papyri, and especially of the papyrus roll of *On*

*Poems One*, its discovery, opening and editing since the eighteenth century. After a brief but informative introduction to Philodemus and his aesthetic works in chapter one, chapter two launches straight into the encyclopedic detail that characterizes the whole book. Here J. shows that the task of reconstructing the original order of the papyrus fragments has been made even more complicated by the efforts of the eighteenth and nineteenth century scholars who worked upon them, referring to the ‘abysmal standards of editing’ of the past (14). The catalogue of fragmentation and layers of indeterminacy is remarkable: the papyrus fragments of *On Poems* survive in six different scribal hands; much of the original papyrus was destroyed by the clumsiness of the initial opening of the rolls; much papyrus from the rolls, once preserved, has since been lost and survives recorded, often imperfectly, only as transcripts; many of these transcripts themselves have only recently been rediscovered; although most of the fragments have been published before they were in the main very badly edited and presented in a ‘completely jumbled’ order ‘in an almost random sequence’ in which correct ordering of fragments occurred only by luck. Only perhaps 45 per cent of *On Poems 1* survives as either papyrus or transcripts, and that papyrus is so blackened that it is often almost impossible to read.

However, this is only half of the story of the fragmentation to be met with in *On Poems*: in addition to this physical fragmentation and catalogue of loss and jumbling of fragments is added the extraordinary complexity, fragmentation, and indeterminacy of the subject matter of the text itself. *On Poems* is a work of Hellenistic literary theory, in which Philodemus gives a critical catalogue of an earlier critical catalogue, by an unnamed philosopher (the Stoic Crates, as J. shows by comparing *On Poems Five*). Crates gave a catalogue of opinions on poetic theory by writers whose names are often known only to us from the works of Philodemus himself, and whose opinions having been run through Crates’ philosophical filter in the earlier critical catalogue are now run through Philodemus’ own philosophical filter, with all the possible distortion and polemical selectivity that entails. The context then, into which the work must be placed and against which it must be interpreted, is largely lost and often can only be reconstructed from Philodemus’ text, which itself can only be reconstructed and interpreted from that context. It is no wonder then, that, as J. says, four previous attempts to edit *On Poems 1* were never published. To make matters even worse, two of these previous editions have since been lost, and only two are still extant! The task then of preventing any argument advanced on these fragments becoming circular is immense, and J.’s decision to attempt the work is one of

outstanding bravery. That it took him nine years to complete is not surprising; that it took so short a time is remarkable.

To look at both papyrus and the text in more detail: the Herculaneum papyri were preserved when the library of the villa of L. Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus was engulfed by pyroclastic flows of volcanic mud and ash from the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD.<sup>1</sup> This was superheated to 300-320 °C and so the papyri were carbonized. They were discovered in 1752-4, and the process of opening and trying to unroll them began soon after. As J. explains (16ff), they were opened by three methods (J. provides a useful illustration in his fig. 2): *scorzatura*, *svolgimento*, and *sollevamento*, sometimes singly and sometimes in combination. Originally, the rolls were simply chopped in half right through the longitudinal axis (*scorzatura totale*), a process that destroyed the middles of the rolls leaving only the concave outer layers. Then shallower cuts were tried, not reaching to the middle of the roll, which could then be extracted (*scorzatura*). Some of these middles were later unwound by a machine invented by Antonio Piaggio (*svolgimento*). The semi-circular *scorze* produced by *scorzatura* were read by a process called *sfogliamento* in which, working outwards from the inside of the roll, a layer was drawn, and then destroyed by scraping off to reveal the next layer beneath. Only the final, outer layer of the papyrus was preserved. Another method was to attempt to lift each layer of the *scorze* off the one beneath (*sollevamento*), working inwards from the outside of the roll. This did not necessarily involve the destruction of the papyrus, but had the disadvantage that several layers tended to lift off at once. Finally, whole papyri could be unwound by *svolgimento* on Piaggio's machine. The roll of *On Poems* 1 was probably subject to *scorzatura totale* and thus no middle has survived, and, as J. shows, was read by both *sfogliamento* and *sollevamento*.

So, the first problem faced by an editor is that little papyrus remains, and many of the transcripts of fragments were not entirely accurate, or were selective in what they chose to record (ignoring letters of incomplete words at the edges of a fragment for instance). The second problem is that of the original numbering and ordering of the fragments. The amazing fact is that the correct method of the ordering of the *scorze* produced by chopping a roll down the middle was discovered only recently by Dirk Obbink and Daniel Delattre.<sup>2</sup> They independently discovered that all earlier attempts at ordering the fragments had taken no account of which

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<sup>1</sup> See the Philodemus Project website online at:  
<http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/classics/philodemus/philhome.htm>

method of opening the papyri had been used. In the case of a roll opened by *sfogliamento* then – scraping away layers of papyrus from the inside of the roll outwards – it was not previously realized that the roll was being read backwards, and so the fragments were ordered backwards. However in many cases simply putting the fragments in inverse order does not restore their original order since one roll would often be subject to a variety of opening techniques including lifting off layers of papyrus which produces a natural forwards ordering of fragments.

After detailing the prehistory of the scholarship, opening, recording and editing of the fragments, J. turns to their format and script, and their syllabification, orthography and punctuation. There follows in chapter four J.'s description of his own reconstruction of the fragments, including detailed tables of joins and parallels, and even detailed tables of the reconstruction of their order by measuring the decreasing circumference of the papyrus roll as the fragments move towards the middle of the roll.

Then in chapter five we are given a summary of the arguments of *On Poems* 1 in which J. goes through each of the critics and philosophers in the Stoic Crates' catalogue, detailing their arguments and Philodemus' rebuttal of each argument and rebuttal of Crates' own views. This is where things begin to get complicated. As I say above Philodemus' presents a critical catalogue of a previous critical catalogue by Crates. Due to the fragmentary nature of the book, it is often very difficult to tell whether we are reading Crates' own views, his presentation of the views of his opponents, Philodemus' version of the views of Crates' opponents, or Philodemus' own views. J. reconstructs the arguments of *On Poems* 1 as follows:

Crates against the 'philosophers' (early Epicureans).

Crates on Megaclides of Athens.

Crates on Andromenides.

Crates against the 'critics'.

Crates on Heracleodorus.

Crates on Pausimachus.

Philodemus' recapitulation of Crates' catalogue.

Philodemus' rebuttal of each argument.

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<sup>2</sup> The Obbink-Delattre method, described by J. on p. 19-20.

The arguments in *On Poems* 1 are essentially on the relationship between form and content in the judgement of poetry. Crates of Mallos was a Stoic philosopher, grammarian and critic described in the Suda as ‘a Stoic philosopher surnamed “Homerist” and “Critic”’,<sup>3</sup> whose work as a grammarian, as J. tells us, made him famous and who visited Rome in 168-7 BC. J. (121) describes his views as follows:

Crates advocated a method of literary judgement independent of philosophy and grammar, in which sound is the sole criterion for excellence in verse. This is the natural excellence of a poem, inherent in the verse and recognized intuitively by the ear. Critics do not evaluate a poem by judging its content or our pleasure in its sound; instead we judge by the ear the rational principles (logika qewrh/mata) that inhere in the verse, and ‘not without the contents, but not the contents themselves’. This means that the critic is aware of the content without judging it in itself when he evaluates the form; presumably it is the task of the philosopher, not the critic, to judge the sense. Crates’ position represents a compromise between a moralist and a formalist approach. Like Philodemus, he denies that one can judge form without reference to the content; this is the main point where his views diverge from those of the euphonists.

Crates begins by attacking the arguments of certain unnamed philosophers whom J. identifies as early Epicureans. They argue, Crates says, that poetic excellence is judged by arbitrary norms, and that there is no natural criterion for judging verse but only conventional criteria which will vary from one person to another. Here clearly we are in the territory of nature and convention, and Philodemus complains that Crates has oversimplified the position, and that the Epicureans posit a third intermediate stage between nature and convention: we judge poetry not by naturally occurring criteria but by universal preconceptions (prolh/yseij) of good and bad verses. Thus Philodemus comes close to the ‘natural criteria’ position, but still insists we judge verse by convention.

Philodemus then moves on to criticize Crates’ criticisms of the ‘musical critics’, those who ascribe the judgement of poetry entirely to the ear. Philodemus complains that he has unjustly included in this group the Peripatetic Megaclides of Athens. The views of Megaclides are lost apart from Philodemus’ very lacunose report here. It seems however, that he probably argued that divine beings should be portrayed in fitting sounds, and as J. says, he also wrote of the pleasure and enchantment of the soul caused by poetry. Philodemus complains that Megaclides

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<sup>3</sup> Suda s.v. Kra/thj (k 2342 Adler).

makes too little distinction between music and poetry: songs enthrall us through the ear, while verse enthralls through the intellect.

Philodemus then moves on to another critic, Andromenides. Apparently Crates had claimed that he was in complete agreement with Andromenides, but, Philodemus says, Crates had misunderstood him. Philodemus does not tell us what Andromenides' views were, but as J. (144) puts it:

Andromenides advocated the importance of the hearing in the judgement of poetry; but he did not hold that the perception of poetry is entirely irrational. Whereas prose aims at truth and utility, poetry aims to please and enthrall the ordinary person by its distinctive expression ... There is no suggestion that poetry can instruct us as well as give pleasure.

Now we are in the territory of 'the contrast between truth and instruction versus and enthrallment' (147) which of course will be crucial in our understanding of Hellenistic theories on didactic poetry.

Next comes a very lacunose section in which Philodemus discussed Crates' criticisms of those critics who argue that the content of a poem is outside the art of poetry, while Crates considered content to be a part of the art of poetry but was not judged separately in itself. It seems that Heracleodorus was chief among these critics. Heracleodorus:

... denied the relevance of the traditional genre-divisions and different styles to the merit of poetry; he even denied that of metre, claiming that some prose writers were poets. He held that both the contents and the words are extraneous to the poetic art, and irrelevant to its quality: what matters is word-order (su/nqesij) and the sound that supervenes upon it. (156)

According to Heracleodorus then, the particularity (i)/dion) of poetry that distinguishes it from prose is euphony and that this euphony arises from the order of the words. If then we change the word-order of a line of verse (meta/qesij) we can render it prose rather than poetry and yet leave the meaning unchanged. Philodemus argues on the contrary that the meaning must always be changed to some degree by meta/qesij.

The next critic treated is Pausimachus who held views even more extreme than the previous euphonists. Pausimachus is again unknown from elsewhere and again his views have to be reconstructed from Philodemus' fragmentary text. It seems that while Heracleodorus was an

advocate of the euphony caused by *su/nqesij* he did not provide any analysis of euphony itself, and this Pausimachus sets out to provide. Pausimachus too argued that plot or content of any kind is irrelevant to good poetry and that euphony caused by *su/nqesij* is the *i)/dion* of poetry. Genre and character are also irrelevant and good poets are better than bad ones simply because their sounds are better. He goes on to analyse euphony into individual sounds and individual letters. L for instance is a euphonious letter while s and c are cacophonous. Thus at the level of analysis below *su/nqesij* sound caused by the natures of the letters themselves is more important than *su/nqesij*. He proves this by applying *meta/qesij* to the words of verse, showing that even *meta/qesij* cannot render words containing cacophonous letters euphonious. Metre likewise is irrelevant to euphony, since replacing euphonious words with cacophonous words of metrical equivalence still produces cacophony. Now we are in the very important territory of natural sounds and this also takes us into theories of the rightness and origins of names and indeed into theories of the origins of language itself. From what may have seemed so far perhaps a rather sterile debate between content and form, arguments on the fundamental nature of language itself have developed. Euphonists such as Pausimachus believed that a good poet produced good poetry because he used sounds that pleased the many. They did so because these sounds reflected the real nature of things and so produced a natural response from the hearer. These sounds were coined by an original name-maker who designed words to suit the nature of the thing they describe. J. traces the development of this idea from Pythagoras, through Cratylus and others, and concludes (189):

The theories of the Euphonists have also had a wider significance. Their belief that there is a natural relation between sound and meaning contains only a kernel of truth, since onomatopoeia is a special case in the generally arbitrary semiotics of natural language ... It opened the door to etymological and allegorical mumbo jumbo of every kind, which did much to reverse the progress of human rationality for many centuries ...

Thus far J.'s summary of the arguments of *On Poems* 1. Now to turn to the arguments of Philodemus himself. After surveying Crates' critical catalogue Philodemus goes on to rebut each argument in turn. Thus his own views appear gradually as he rebuts those of others and have to be reconstructed from his polemics. As I say above, Crates considered that sound is the sole criterion for excellence in verse but allowed a place for content. We judge the sound and the ear judges the rational principles that inhere in the verse and which bring along with them the

content. Thus we do judge the content but not separately from the sound and only vicariously as it were. Philodemus is concerned to rescue content and establish its importance in poetry. He argues that we have a preconception both of good form and good content in verse and that from this comes our pleasure in poetry. In fact it is the presentation of content in poetry that moves us: euphony alone leaves us unmoved. The content of poetry is judged by the rational faculties, and the effect of poetry is produced by a combination of sound and content. Both sound and content, then, are the complementary and inseparable *synthesis* of poetry. *Meta/quesij* whether of letters or words will always be the meaning of the poetry, and so the euphonists are wrong to argue that euphony alone is the *synthesis* of poetry.<sup>4</sup> This is all very well as far as it goes: Philodemus was a poet as well as a philosopher and so was concerned to rescue poetry from becoming a mere meaningless arrangement of attractive sounds. But how far does *On Poems* 1 take us towards an understanding of the Epicurean view of the relationship between philosophy and poetry and of the status of didactic poetry? This question is inevitable of course because we have the extant works of two Epicurean poets, Philodemus and Lucretius. J. sees Lucretius' decision to write philosophical didactic poetry as a further extension of Philodemus' position that content in poetry is important, but on the other hand we know that Philodemus was firmly opposed to the use of poetry for didactic purposes, and considered that prose was the more powerful medium, and the proper medium, for the conveyance of ideas. As is well known, Epicurus himself allowed that the philosopher may listen to poetry for pleasure but saw poetry, especially the poetry of Homer, as the dangerous handmaiden of false religion. In his view, poetry, along with sacrifices and religious processions had been originally responsible for the spread of religious error.<sup>5</sup> Epicurus, unlike Philodemus, did allow the didactic force of poetry then, but saw its teaching only in negative terms. For him the glamour and charm of poetry was a dangerous siren-song, and so he seems to have seen poetry as a more powerful and thus more dangerous vehicle for the conveyance of ideas than is prose, at least of false ideas. In this Lucretius seems to be much closer to Epicurus than is Philodemus: Lucretius saw that if poetry is such a powerful medium for falsehood, then it may be used against itself as it were, and against falsehood by its power to spread ideas through its attractiveness and glamour. He seems to have taken much of

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<sup>4</sup> For the implications of Philodemus' insistence of the impossibility of *meta/quesij* and its relationship to the Democritean and Lucretian analogy between letters and atoms, see especially the articles by Asmis, Porter, and Armstrong in D. Obbink (ed.) *Philodemus and Poetry* (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> See Dirk Obbink, 'How to Read Poetry about Gods', in D. Obbink (ed.), 1995, 189-219.

this approach from Empedocles, and to have simply inverted Epicurus' position. Philodemus on the other hand seems to occupy something of an uncomfortable position with regard to Epicurean orthodoxy. He denies the validity of didactic poetry while at the same time defending the importance of content in poetry. Indeed as David Armstrong has shown,<sup>6</sup> for Philodemus, content in didactic poetry was simply the 'honey round the cup' while of course for Lucretius form enticed the reader in. I find it difficult to see, as J. does, that Augustan poets, especially Vergil and Horace can be seen developing Philodemus' ideas of the importance of content in poetry. Vergil especially takes his lead directly from Lucretius in his move into didactic and epic poetry.

*On Poems* 1 will inevitably be valuable evidence for our debates on the relationship between Lucretius and Epicurus and between poetry and philosophy, and our knowledge will deepen with the publication of the other books of *On Poems*. In this J. has done sterling service for scholarship, and as I say above, his reconstruction and editing of the papyrus ranks as an outstanding feat of scholarship. On the other hand, there are inevitable criticisms of the book to be made. Inevitably the fragmentary nature of the text makes this a very difficult book to read. Further, although J. defends Philodemus both as a prose writer and a philosopher, I have a strong suspicion that Philodemus is neither a good writer of prose nor a terribly good philosopher. This adds to the difficulty of interpreting his arguments and makes clear and lucid analysis and presentation of the arguments more necessary. However, J. has a strong tendency to allow his arguments and analysis to develop gradually, not separating his very detailed and difficult evidence from his conclusions. This makes it very difficult to find his conclusions in the text, and his summaries in the first and sixth chapters are brief and somewhat lacking in depth. He also makes no great attempts to extrapolate from his evidence.<sup>7</sup> As I say we have the works of two Epicurean poets, yet I can find only a few brief references to Lucretius in the book. Further, I find the layout of the text and commentary somewhat confusing. The text is laid out in column form on the left-hand page with the critical apparatus alongside it. Then the text is laid out on the right-hand page with the translation underneath, and the commentary as a series of footnotes to the translation beneath that. This method seems much less user-friendly than Dirk Obbink's

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<sup>6</sup> In Obbink (ed.), 1995, 218.

<sup>7</sup> Compare David Armstrong's stimulating discussion of the implications of *meta/qesij* in Lucretius and Philodemus *On Poems* 5: 'The Impossibility of Metathesis: Philodemus and Lucretius on Form and Content in Poetry', in Obbink (ed.), 1995, 210-32.

technique of providing a separate commentary at the back of his edition of Philodemus *On Piety*, and gives far less space for detailed analysis and discussion of the arguments.

Despite these criticisms, J. has produced from remarkably difficult and randomly fragmented material, after nine years labour and employing a polymathic range of knowledge and skills, an extremely valuable addition to scholarship on Hellenistic philosophy and poetic theory.