CHAPTER TWO

HESIOD

R. NÜNLIST

Theogony

The subject matter and general structure of the Theogony proper (116ff.; on the introductory ‘Hymn to the Muses’ see below) are dominated by the genealogies of the Greek pantheon, which are presented in what essentially is a chronological order. After asking the Muses to tell him ‘from the beginning’ (ex arkhēs) and to ‘say what thing among them came first’ (115), the Hesiodic narrator opens the Theogony as follows: ‘First (prōtista) came the Chasm (Chaos); and then broad-breasted Earth (Gaia) …’ (116; tr. West). He goes on to narrate the birth of the gods and divinities who belong to the first generation (children of Chaos and Gaia), the second (children of Gaia’s children Uranus [the Titans] and Pontus, and of Chaos’ child Night), the third (grandchildren of Pontus and Uranus; esp. Zeus and his Olympian siblings) and the fourth (the children of the Olympians) respectively.\(^1\) While the general sequence of these genealogies is chronological, it is clear that the narrator’s goal is not to maintain a rigid chronology. He regularly pushes ahead and narrates the birth and experiences of divine characters who belong to the same family branch, especially if ‘the end of a branch is in sight’.\(^2\) Genealogical method and transparency prevail over strict chronology. An illustrative example comes from the passage on Pontus’ children Phorcys and Ceto and their children: Ceto gives birth, among oth-

---

\(^1\) Scholars have long noted that the first three generations of gods occur, in reverse order, in the ‘Hymn to the Muses’: 11–21. For an attempt to explain the reverse order see Muellner 1996: 54–55 with n. 7 (but cf. n. 31 below). Note that the counting of divine generations (first, second, etc.) is a modern abstraction. The Hesiodic narrator himself always speaks in terms of genealogy. Contrast the myth of the races in Works and Days, where the counting is his own. Occasionally, the narrator indicates the sequence of children that are born from the same mother (cf. n. 9).

\(^2\) M.L. West 1966: 38.
ers, to the Gorgon Medusa (276), who, together with Poseidon (278), begets Chrysaor and Pegasus (281), with Perseus acting as an unusual ‘midwife’ (he cuts off Medusa’s head, 280). Chrysaor, together with the nymph Callirhoe, begets Geryoneus (287), who is killed by Heracles (289) on account of his cattle (the tenth of Heracles’ labors). The narrator gives up strict chronology in order to make clear the details of a family tree. Not only does he push down the family line by several generations (when the section on Phorcys and Ceto and their offspring comes to an end in 337, the narrative will return to the Titans Oceanus and Tethys, who belong to the same generation as Phorcys and Ceto), he also accepts the mild paradox that his narrative presupposes the presence of characters who strictly speaking are not born yet: in the present case Poseidon (birth narrated in 456), Callirhoe (351), and Heracles (943). While it is true that the Hesiodic narrator has no difficulties with the presence of such characters, it must also be said that the relevant passages mostly are comparatively short (i.e. summary; see below). Some scholars treat passages with ‘unborn’ characters as a form of prolepsis, which is a less than fortunate extension of the concept. The narrator does not really ‘look ahead’ to the future birth of a character, but simply allows his narrative to jump ahead to a time when the character was born already.

Such chronological ‘inconsistencies’ (if the term is appropriate) occur regularly and at both a larger and a smaller scale. An example of the former is the passage that has just been interpreted. An example of the latter can be found in the passage about the birth of Aphrodite. Cronus cuts off Oceanus’ genitals and throws them behind himself into the sea, while Gaia receives the drops of blood: ‘and as the year went round she bore the powerful Erinyes and the great Giants in gleaming armor with long spears in their hands and the nymphs whom they call Meliai on the boundless earth’ (184–187). After briefly indicating what happens to the blood drops, the narrator sets back the clock, so to speak, by one year and returns to Oceanus’ genitals, from which Aphrodite is born.