POETRY AND POETICS IN THE HESIODIC CORPUS

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Standing in the enormous shadow cast by Homer, Hesiod has been considered a poet of inferior status from an insignificant Boeotian market town, which he himself describes in negative terms (WD 640: Ὅμηρος, διάκειμαι κατηγορίας, θέρεισκαὶ ἀγαλλάς, οὐδὲ ποτε ἔσθαλή). Yet the uncertainty surrounding Hesiod is entirely different in type from that surrounding Homer. In contrast to the external narrator of Homeric epic, who never reveals his identity, Hesiod lavishes his audience with information concerning his own self: his father came from Cyme in Asia Minor (which had been founded by Aeolian colonists), but migrated to Ascra. We also learn of a brother named Perses, who is the constant recipient of advice in the Works and Days.

Following Lamberton,¹ I consider that later biographical accounts of Hesiod’s life resulting from the overabundance of information in Hesiodic poetry itself aim to promote a historically defined creator on a par with Homer. In this light, Hesiod is used in this chapter to refer to the poetic tradition epitomized in his name, and not to a historical Hesiod, poet of the Theogony, the Works and Days, and the Catalogue of Women. In fact, he “may be considered an idealized creation of the poetry in which he has an integral function—and which he is credited with creating.”²

Theogony

Despite being generally treated as simplistic in comparison with Homeric epic, the Theogony engages its listeners in a profound game with questions of genre, identity and poetry, as well as singer-audience relations. Given the wide scope of this topic, I intend to focus my attention on three aspects of Hesiodic concern with poetics, namely the acquisition of a

¹ All translations of Hesiodic passages are those of Most (2006–2007).
² Nagy (1990b) 52.
distinct generic identity as expressed in the proem, by far the most dense poetological passage of the *Theogony*, the poetic aspirations and Pan-Hellenic scope of this epic as shown in the interpretively arcane Hymn to Hecate, and last—but certainly not least—the interaction between narrator and audience that will be studied under the narratological rubric of “commentary”.

The Proem of the *Theogony*

The presence of the Muses in the proems of all three main Hesiodic poems indicates that they function as a catalyst in Hesiodic poetry, the more so since the invocation of the Muse(s) is an established theme in archaic Greek epic.³

References to the Muse in the proems of the *Iliad* (1.1), the *Odyssey* (1.1; 1.10) and the Homeric *Hymns to Hermes* (4.1) and *Aphrodite* (5.1) take the form of typical epic invocations. Yet the proem of the *Theogony* (1–115) makes these references more specific and by recording them on the level of divine revelation attempts to link the Hesiodic composition to its divine “hypostasis”, the Muses that inhabit Mt. Helicon.⁴ The regular use of ἄρκΘΥωτΥκροΡμαι (Th. 1, Homeric *Hymns to Demeter* 2.1, *to Athena* 11.1, *to Demeter* 13.1, *to Asclepius* 16.1, *to Poseidon* 22.1, *to the Muses and Apollo* 25.1, *to Dionysus* 26.1, *to Athena* 28.1) follows an established pattern.⁵ Yet in essence, in the proem of the *Theogony* it functions in a more elaborate manner. The “substitution” of the hymnic singular (ἄρκΘΥομαι) by the plural (ἄρκΘΥωμεθα) is no mere detail of grammar.⁶ It suggests that the poet and Muses are to be treated as collaborators, even though the initial relationship between them was probably that of teacher and pupil. The Hesiodic song cannot but begin *with* the Muses, given that it had its beginnings *in* the Muses, who taught the insignificant shepherd the art of song. Manner and causative affinity are treated as identical here, paving the way for the recounting of a metaphorical encounter, which sets out the spatial and temporal boundaries of the Hesiodic poetic journey. From this point of view, ἄρκΘΥωμεθα acquires a secondary, figurative meaning.

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³ For a structural division of the proem of the *Theogony*, see Kambylis (1965) 34–35.
⁵ Hymn 25.2–5 (*to the Muses and Apollo*) reproduces verses 94–97 of the Hesiodic *Theogony*. The shift from ἄρκΘΥομαι to ἄρκΘΥωμαι (25.1) is metri gratia.
⁶ See the present participle ὑμνεῦσαι, which constitutes an internal indication of the genre of the Muses’ song and the nature of the proem.