

“LIES UNLIKE THE TRUTH”: PLATO ON HESIOD, *THEOGONY* 27

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In Plato's discussion of stories, *mythoi*, at the end of *Republic* 2 (376–383), the philosopher condemns the myths of Hesiod and Homer and advocates a better kind, made according to philosophical principles. This kind of story, he writes, is created by “likening falsehood to the truth as much as possible” (ἀφομοιούμεντες τῷ ἀληθεῖ τὸ ψεῦδος ὅτι μάλιστα: 382D2–3). This phrase is strikingly similar to that of Hesiod in *Theogony* 27, where the Muses who appear to the poet claim to speak many false things, *pseudea*, like the truth, as well as the truth, *alêtheia*:¹

ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα,
ἴδμεν δ' εὖτ' ἐθέλωμεν, ἀληθέα γηρύνσασθα. (*Th.* 27–28)

Plato does not, however, merely remind us of Hesiod's line; he also gives, in the course of his discussion of literature, what amounts to an interesting interpretation of its meaning. There is reason to believe that one of Plato's specific targets in *Republic* 2 was Hesiod's line, which he read as a claim to speak “lies like truth.” Part of Plato's purpose in *Republic* 2, then, is to explain and analyze this claim, before concluding that the poet creates only “lies unlike the truth.”

Plato's view of *Theogony* 27 deserves consideration for the insight it provides into his own ideas on myth and poetry. It also merits attention as literary criticism, since it contains a plausible interpretation of Hesiod's poetic and theological purposes and contributes some new ideas to a modern controversy about what Hesiod's *pseudea* are and in what sense they are “like the truth.” The main modern interpretations of the line all involve serious difficulties. Some scholars believe that *pseudea*

¹ *Theogony* 27 is often cited in connection with Plato's description of *mythos* as “falsehood.” See, for example, B. Jowett and L. Campbell, *Plato's Republic* (Oxford 1894) 3.96 and P.-M. Schuhl, *Études sur la fabulation platonicienne* (Paris 1947) 102, note 3. The specific verbal echo of *Th.* 27 at *Rep.* 2.382D2–3 has, however, never been commented on.

I follow the texts of J. Burnet, *Platonis Opera* 4 (Oxford 1902; rpt. 1968) and M. West, *Hesiod, Theogony* (Oxford 1966). All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

has a negative sense and refers to the "deceptive lies" told by a kind of poetry Hesiod contrasts with his own. Verdenius, for example, argues that *Theogony* 27–28 means: "Instead of producing deceptive pictures (as we did in the Homeric epic) we shall now stick to the truth."² This is not, however, what Hesiod actually says. He does not mention Homer or any other specific rival, and he does not even clearly indicate that he himself will speak the truth and nothing but the truth.³ Good objections have also been made to the view held by other scholars that *pseudea* has a positive sense, referring to skillful and beautiful poetic "fictions," whether in Hesiod's own work or in that of others.⁴ If, for example, these *pseudea* are contained in Hesiod's own work and mixed together with the truth by the Muses themselves, what criterion can there be for distinguishing truth from falsehood?⁵ These and other arguments of modern scholars cannot be fully examined here.⁶ Nor does this study attempt to discuss Plato's extensive attacks on Homer, his attitude towards other poets, and other relevant ancient material.⁷ It is primarily concerned with an analysis of Plato's views on myth in general and on Hesiod specifically, which are not without interest for problems in Hesiodic interpretation on which there is no consensus.

Plato's attack on Hesiod depends on his concept of falsehoods like truth. These "lies" are a particular kind of story (*logos*) that Plato is careful to distinguish from other kinds in his account of the correct use of stories in the education of young children. He begins, in a statement

² W. J. Verdenius, "Notes on the Proem of Hesiod's *Theogony*," *Mnemosyne* ser. 4, 25 (1972) 234. Among the others who hold that *pseudea* has a negative sense are H. Diller, "Hesiod und die Anfänge der griechische Philosophie," *A&A* 2 (1946) 141 = *Kleine Schriften*, ed. H.-J. Newiger and H. Seyffert (Munich 1971) 21; K. von Fritz, "Das Proömium der hesiodischen Theogonie," *Festschrift Bruno Snell* (Munich 1956) 36 = *Hesiod*, ed. E. Heitsch, *Wege der Forschung* 44 (Darmstadt 1966) 304; West (above, note 1) 162; H. Neitzel, "Hesiod und die lügenden Musen," *Hermes* 108 (1980) 387–401.

³ For these and other objections to the view that *pseudea* has a negative sense see W. Stroh, "Hesiods lügende Musen," in *Studien zum antiken Epos, Franz Dirlmeier und Viktor Pöschl gewidmet*, ed. H. Goergemanns and E. Schmidt, *Beitr. zur Klass. Philol.* 72 (Meisenheim 1976) 85–112, esp. 86–97.

⁴ Among those who give *pseudea* a positive sense are Stroh (above, note 3); W. Kraus, "Die Auffassung des Dichterberufs im frühen Griechentum," *WS* 68 (1955) 65–87, esp. 72–73; W. Otto, "Hesiodea" in *Varia Variorum. Festgabe für K. Reinhardt* (Münster and Köln 1952) 49–57, esp. 51–52.

⁵ This objection is raised by Neitzel (above, note 2) 389 and by A. Setti "La memoria e il canto. Saggio di poetica arcaica greca," *SIFC* 30 (1958) 158. See also P. Pucci, *Hesiod and the Language of Poetry* (Baltimore and London 1977) 8–14, who argues that *Th.* 27–28 raises the question about criteria for distinguishing truth from falsehood, though the poet himself may not be entirely aware of it.

⁶ Thorough surveys of the substantial bibliography on *Th.* 27–28 are given by Neitzel (above, note 2) and Stroh (above, note 3).

⁷ This material includes *Od.* 19.203 (see below, p. 52 and note 15), Xenophanes fr. 35, and Theognis 713, listed by West (above, note 1) 163.

reminiscent of *Theogony* 27–28, by stating that there are two kinds of stories, true and false. The false stories are *mythoi*, constituting a genre which is “false as a whole” but which “contains some true things” (*Rep.* 2.376E–377A). True stories in this passage are not stories that are true in a moral or religious sense, for later on (2.382D) Plato tells us that some *mythoi*, which contain religious and moral truths, are falsehoods like the truth. Thus, if the true stories, to which the genre of *mythoi* (“false stories”) is opposed, were morally true stories, the distinction between the two genres would collapse. Instead, the true stories, as Adam notes, are those concerned with human beings, a subject Plato postpones (3.392A–C) until after the central question of the *Republic* has been answered.⁸ True stories are accurate reports about matters (human affairs) concerning which factual knowledge is possible. Plato’s concept of truth in this context is, then, close to our concept of factual truth. True stories are factually true and even false stories, *mythoi*, may contain some facts. It does not follow, however, that he means by “false stories,” *mythoi*, exactly what we mean by stories that are factually or historically false. At 2.382D, Plato writes that false stories are useful when “we don’t know the truth about ancient things.” Thus, *mythos* does not tell deliberate lies about historical facts; it deals with matters—gods, heroes and the underworld (3.392A)—about which, for the most part, no facts can be ascertained.⁹

Plato distinguishes these false stories from what he calls the “true lie,” τὸ ὡς ἀληθῶς ψεῦδος, that all humans and gods hate (2.382A). To have this “true lie” is “to be and remain deceived in one’s soul about what is, and to be ignorant and to acquire and keep lies there” (2.382B).¹⁰ A false story, on the other hand, is only a “lie in words.” It is an imitation, *mimēma*, or an image, *eidolon*, of an affection in the soul and is not an “entirely unmixed lie” (2.382B–C).¹¹ Plato’s distinction between the lie in the soul and the lie in words makes better sense when we consider his examples of lies in words. Lies may be useful, he says, (1) against enemies, (2) to benefit friends who are foolish or insane, or (3) when we don’t know the truth about ancient things (2.382C–D). The last example tells against the view that the lie in the soul is simply ignorance in the ordinary sense of lack of

⁸ J. Adam, *The Republic of Plato* (1902; 2nd ed., Cambridge 1963) ad 376E–377A.

⁹ Again, Adam has the correct account.

¹⁰ On the translation of this passage see Jowett (above, note 1) 3.106.

¹¹ Plato’s concept of true and false stories in *Republic* 2 is best examined independently of his detailed analysis of the relation between *mimēsis* and falsehood in *Rep.* 3 and 10. These later accounts depend on several ideas not discussed in *Rep.* 2, for example, the distinction between imitation and narrative, and the psychological and metaphysical theories of the middle books. On *mimēsis* see “A Theory of Imitation in Plato’s *Republic*,” *TAPA* 114 (1984) 121–46.

knowledge, while the lie in words is told by someone who knows the truth,¹² for the third kind of liar in words mentioned by Plato also doesn't know the truth. The correct account is, instead, that those with lies in their souls have the false belief that they know what they do not know (they are "deceived"). This, as *Sophist* 229c states, is the greatest ignorance.

The liars in words, however, have true, false, or no beliefs at all about the subject on which they speak. Their lies consist in a claim to have beliefs different from those they actually have. It is for this reason that the spoken lie is called a *mimêma*, or false reflection, of beliefs. This account fits the two examples of the liars who speak contrary to their beliefs, (1) and (2), and that of the liars who claim to know what they in fact do not know, (3). This last case is that of the makers of false stories, *mythoi*. *Mythoi* are only imitations, *mimêmata*, of factual truth. Plato's *mythoi*, "false stories," are, then, stories about gods, heroes, and other matters about which we cannot ascertain the truth, told by those who pretend to know the truth about these things.

These falsehoods can nevertheless be useful if they are like the truth, for Plato does not simply commend true stories and condemn the false. That he does not is apparent not only from his advocacy of useful lies in *Republic* 3 (389b–c and 414b–c), but also from his statement at *Republic* 2.378a that some stories should not be repeated "even if they were true." Good stories, whether true or false, are those that make the young better, by conforming to two "patterns," *typoi*: (1) that the gods are the cause of good things only and not of evil (2.379b–c), and (2) that the gods do not change shape or otherwise deceive humans (2.380d ff.). These patterns do not concern specific events and deeds, but deal with the nature of the gods: οἶος τυγχάνει ὁ θεὸς ὢν (2.379a). About this subject, Plato does claim knowledge. He states that "god is good in reality" (τῷ ὄντι, 2.379b), and that stories about battles among the gods are "not true" (2.378c). Good *mythos* may follow these patterns by claiming that specific events occurred about which we cannot know the truth. We would say that such a story is true in a moral or religious sense, but that it is historically or factually false. What Plato says is that in this kind of story, "when we don't know the truth about ancient things," we "make the false like the truth as much as possible" (2.382d). Truth here is again something similar to factual truth. Falsehood is like this truth when it relates events that are consistent with a world where the gods have a certain nature. Plato condemns only the poet who makes falsehoods unlike what could happen in a world with truthful and good divinities. This poet is "like a painter drawing things that do not resemble that which he wished to draw" (2.377e); he is

¹² This seems to be the view of Adam (above, note 8) ad 382b.

guilty of “making an imitation that is unlike the model” (*ἀνομοίως μιμήσασθαι*, 3.388c).¹³

Once it is clear what Plato means by falsehoods like the truth, the specific grounds on which he criticizes Hesiod are also apparent. Plato believes that Hesiod does not tell the truth (2.378c1), but he does not condemn the poet just for this reason. Hesiod is condemned because he “does not tell falsehoods well” (2.377d). In particular, Plato claims that Hesiod does not lie well about the hostilities of Ouranos, Kronos, and Zeus (2.377e–378a)—a clear reference to the succession stories of the *Theogony*. These stories are inconsistent with the first pattern: that the gods are not the cause of evil. Plato does not explicitly state that Hesiod’s *Theogony* is inconsistent with the second pattern, that the gods do not deceive, but he does make this point indirectly, by means of an allusion to *Theogony* 27. The gods of the *Theogony* often lie to and deceive each other,¹⁴ but what Plato’s second pattern is most concerned with is their lying to humans: “Do they make us believe that they appear in various forms, deceiving and tricking us?” (2.381e), he asks, and concludes that the gods “are not magicians who change themselves or mislead us with lies” (2.383a). Gods do not deceive humans in the *Theogony*, with the two exceptions of the creation of Pandora, made to be a *dolos* to men (589), and Hesiod’s Muses, who can speak “false things like the truth.” It is significant, then, that immediately after Plato describes good *mythoi* as falsehoods like the truth (2.382d2), he denies that the gods make *mythoi*, stating that “there is no lying poet in god” (2.382d9). This otherwise puzzling statement makes excellent sense if we see it as an attack on the Muses of *Theogony* 27. If this is so, Plato’s criticism of Hesiod is based in every detail on his concept of falsehoods like the truth. He claims that Hesiod tells neither the truth nor lies like the truth, lies that are consistent with the two specific patterns laid down by the philosopher.

What Plato’s criticism of Hesiod amounts to, then, is a rejection of both claims made by the Muses of *Theogony* 27–28. This cannot be mere coincidence in the context of a passage that refers to and echoes the *Theogony* in so many ways. As we have seen, Plato reminds us of Hesiod when he distinguishes between true and false speech (2.376e11). He twice mentions Hesiod by name (2.377d4 and e8); he condemns

¹³ For good discussions of Plato’s concept of falsehood like the truth, see R. Nettleship, *The Theory of Education in the Republic of Plato* (Chicago 1906) 32–34, and, more recently, C. Gill, “Plato’s Atlantis Story and the Birth of Fiction,” *Philosophy and Literature* 3 (1979) 64–78, esp. 65–67. I am indebted to the anonymous referee of *TAPA* for calling my attention to Prof. Gill’s works.

¹⁴ For example, Kronos overcomes Ouranos by a trick (168–82); Rhea conceals Zeus from Kronos (468–91); Prometheus attempts to trick Zeus (533–60); Zeus deceives Metis, δόλῳ φρένας ἐξαπατήσας (889).

the *Theogony* succession story for being inconsistent with his first pattern, and he alludes to *Theogony* 27 when he denies that gods are lying poets. Plato must also be alluding to *Theogony* 27 when he writes that the makers of good *mythos* are engaged in “likening falsehood to the truth as much as possible” (2.382D2–3). Of course, he is in part attacking Homer, for the line also recalls *Odyssey* 19.203:¹⁵

Ἴσκει ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγων ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα.

Plato’s phrase does double duty, however, for the statement is certainly a verbal echo of *Theogony* 27, especially since Plato has explicitly accused Hesiod of telling falsehoods unlike the truth. Plato’s attack on Hesiod, then, uses the poet’s own words against him.

Plato is not deliberately distorting Hesiod’s meaning for his own polemical purposes, but offering a serious interpretation of *Theogony* 27 when he describes good *mythos* as false things like the true and states that it is made by those who “do not know the truth about ancient things” (2.382D). That is, Plato reads *Theogony* 27 as a claim made by Hesiod’s Muses to create good *mythos* in the sense defined in *Republic* 2: stories concerning events about which we cannot know the truth but which are consistent with what we do know about the nature of the gods. This view is consistent with Plato’s statements about stories, his own and those of others,¹⁶ and it provides a plausible interpretation of Hesiod.

Plato often describes his own stories in terms similar to those used in *Republic* 2 to describe the good false stories.¹⁷ For example, in the *Phaedo* (114D) he states that no sensible person would maintain that things are exactly as recounted in the preceding eschatological story, but that, if the soul is immortal, it follows that “these things or some such things” are true. Here, then, is an example of a false story that is like the truth in that it is consistent with a true pattern.

The *Timaeus* provides an especially good example of a Platonic false story like the truth. Timaeus calls the cosmogony of the *Timaeus* a

¹⁵ On the relationship between *Od.* 19.203 and *Th.* 27 see I. Sellschopp, *Stilistische Untersuchungen zu Hesiod* (Hamburg 1934) 42–43; West (above, note 1) 163; G. Edwards, *The Language of Hesiod in Its Traditional Context* (Oxford 1971) 166–68.

¹⁶ The account below merely points out some parallels between Plato’s stories and those of the poets, and cannot deal with such controversies as the distinction between myth and *logos* or the function of myth in Plato’s dialogues. Some of the most important books that consider these and other aspects of Platonic myth are L. Courdurat, *De Platonis Mythis* (Paris 1896); J. Stewart, *The Myths of Plato*, ed. and introd. G. Levy (London 1905; rpt. Carbondale, Ill. 1960); P. Frutiger, *Les Mythes de Platon* (Paris 1930); Schuhl (above, note 1). For an extensive recent bibliographical survey of works on Plato and myth see K. Moors, *Platonic Myth. An Introductory Study* (Washington, D.C. 1982) Chapter 1.

¹⁷ On this aspect of Plato’s myths, and on the creation story of the *Timaeus* in particular, see Gill, above, note 13, and “The Genre of the Atlantis Story,” *CP* 72 (1977) 287–304, esp. 290–91 and 302–3.

"likely story" (*eikos mythos*), a description he explains at 27D–29D.¹⁸ This sensible world is only a "likeness" (*eikôn*) of the changeless "model" (*paradeigma*) after which it was created. For this reason, we cannot attain to truth (*alêtheia*) about this world or give "irrefutable" accounts of it, but only a "likely story," *eikota mython* (29B1–c3). Timaeus concludes:

Do not wonder, Socrates, if concerning many things, the gods and the genesis of everything, we are not able to give accounts that are completely and in every way consistent and accurate. But we must be content if we can nevertheless furnish likely accounts . . . [and] if we get a likely story (*eikota mython*) concerning these things we must seek for nothing beyond this. (29c–d)

Just as the good *mythoi* of *Republic* 2 are like the truth if they are consistent with the true patterns (*typoi*) about the nature of the gods, so the cosmogony of the *Timaeus* is "likely" if it is consistent with these patterns, one of the most important of which is that god is good (*Tim.* 29A, *Rep.* 2.381B1). The creation story of the *Timaeus*, then, is one of the falsehoods like truth discussed in *Republic* 2. It is "likely" (*eikos*) because it is consistent with a *typos* we know to be true.¹⁹

Like *Republic* 2, the *Timaeus* also criticizes bad stories. After describing the creation of the sun and stars, Timaeus comments ironically on those who claim to know about the origins of Gaia, Ouranos, Zeus, Hera, and the other traditional gods:

To speak and to know about the origin of the other divinities is a task too great for our abilities, but we have to trust those who have spoken in former times, since they are the offspring of the gods, as they claim, and doubtless know well their own ancestors. It is not possible to disbelieve the children of the gods, even though they speak without giving likely (*eikotôn*) or necessary proofs, but since they claim to report their own affairs, we must believe them following tradition. (40D–E)

In this passage, Plato attacks traditional theogonies in general and not Hesiod specifically, for Hesiod is not mentioned by name, and, in

¹⁸ For the phrase "likely story" (or "words") see *Tim.* 29c2, c8, d2, and 48d2–3. The outlines of Plato's concept are clear enough for our present purposes, though the precise way in which this concept should be applied to the *Timaeus* story is highly controversial. For the issues involved in this dispute see especially G. Vlastos, "The Disorderly Motion in the *Timaeus*," *CQ* 33 (1939) 71–83; rpt. in *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics*, ed. R. Allen (London 1965) 379–99; H. Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy* (Baltimore 1944) 1.421–31; L. Tarán, "The Creation Myth in Plato's *Timaeus*," in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy* 1, ed. J. Anton and G. Kustas (Albany 1971) 372–407.

¹⁹ On the connection between *eikos* and *typos* cf. *Crat.* 432E6–7, which states that a name, a kind of image (*eikôn*), names something "so long as the *typos* of the thing spoken of is present in it." This passage was called to my attention by E. Lee, *The Concept of the "Image" in Plato's Metaphysics* (Diss. Johns Hopkins 1964) 15.

fact, the miniature theogony given immediately following at 40E is inconsistent with that of Hesiod. Hesiod's *Theogony*, however, is certainly included within this genre of traditional theogonies.²⁰ The gods Plato mentions are the anthropomorphic deities dealt with in Hesiod's poem, and the authorities Timaeus appeals to are, like Hesiod's Muses, "the children of the gods." It is interesting, then, that the *Timaeus* criticizes these authorities for speaking "without giving likely or necessary proofs." Something that cannot be shown to be either likely or necessary is, like the stories of Hesiod Plato attacks in *Republic* 2, neither true nor like the truth. Thus, whether or not the phrase "likely or necessary proofs" alludes directly to *Theogony* 27–28, it attacks a view of poetry similar to that expressed by Hesiod's Muses. The *Timaeus*, then, supports the view that in *Republic* 2 Plato is attacking a genre of poetry that includes Hesiod's *Theogony*.

Another passage in *Republic* 2 itself provides further evidence that Plato regarded some of the stories of the poets as attempts to create falsehoods like the truth. At 2.378D he states that bad stories must not be allowed into the city "whether they are made as allegory or without allegory" (οὐτ' ἐν ὑπονοίαις πεποιημένας οὔτε ἄνευ ὑπονοιῶν). Vicaire's remarks are helpful. He notes that allegorical interpretation of the poets was widely current in Plato's time and before, and that Plato's own use of the technical term *hyponoia* in *Republic* 2.378D is one indication that the philosopher was well acquainted with it. Significantly, as Vicaire notes, Plato attributes the creation of allegory to the poets themselves: the poems he condemns are not merely "interpreted allegorically" but "made allegorically" (ἐν ὑπονοίαις πεποιημένας).²¹ In other passages also, though he does not use the technical term,²² Plato demonstrates an awareness of what we may call the allegorical interpretations of critics or suggests that the poets intended their own works to have hidden meanings. The philosopher's examples, moreover, clearly indicate that what he had in mind was something very similar to his concept of false stories like the truth in *Republic* 2. Thus, in the *Cratylus*, Socrates cites *Iliad* 14.201: "Ocean, father of the gods and their mother Tethys," and says that Homer expresses in this way the Heraclitean idea that all things are in flux.²³ Though Socrates' statement is

²⁰ In the *Timaeus*, for example, Phorkys is the child of Oceanos and Tethys, while in the *Theogony* (233–37) he is the child of Pontos and Gaia. As A. E. Taylor remarks, Plato's target is generic rather than specific: "The satire is directed against speculative theogonies like those of Hesiod and the Orphics" (*A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* [Oxford 1928] 246).

²¹ P. Vicaire, *Platon, critique littéraire* (Paris 1960) 391–92.

²² Vicaire (above, note 21) 391, note 2.

²³ *Crat.* 402A–B. Cf. *Thet.* 152E and 153C–D, *Laws* 2.672A–D, *Rep.* 4.441B–C. I owe these examples to Vicaire (above, note 21) 393 and note 4.

ironical in this case instead of serious literary criticism, it does show that this story is a falsehood like the truth, for though it is a false story that Ocean and Tethys are literally the parents of the gods, this story is consistent with the Heracleitean pattern assumed for the purposes of argument to be true. Plato's statement about allegory in *Republic* 2, then, can help to shed light on his view of stories as falsehoods like the truth. It indicates that this view of poetry was widely held and that, moreover, Plato attributed it to the poets themselves.²⁴

There is, then, good evidence that Plato viewed many of his own philosophical stories as successful attempts to create falsehoods like the truth, that he believed the poets had tried and failed to produce these, and that he read *Theogony* 27 as a false claim made by Hesiod to have created this kind of story. The consequences these views have for an interpretation of Hesiod must now be considered in more detail.

Plato's false stories are stories about gods, heroes, and other matters about which we cannot ascertain the truth, told by those who claim to know the truth about these things. These lies are like the truth if they are consistent with what we do know about the nature of the gods. Thus, if Hesiod's Muses speak falsehoods like the truth, as the poet claims, they tell stories that are consistent with the truth they know about the nature of the gods, though these stories concern events about which they, the Muses, do not have exact factual knowledge.

At first, this might appear to be a very implausible interpretation of the *Theogony*. For surely Hesiod's Muses, like Plato's gods, have no need to lie. According to Homer, the Muses guarantee the truth of what they speak because they were eyewitnesses of the events they describe:

Tell me now, you Muses who have your homes on Olympus.
For you, who are goddesses, are there, and you know all things,
and we have heard only the rumour of it and know nothing.
(*Iliad* 2.484–86, Lattimore)

There is, however, a crucial difference between the Muses of the *Iliad* and those of the *Theogony*. Hesiod's Muses were not eyewitnesses of most of what they recount because they were not yet born at the time the events occurred. They are the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, as we are told (*Th.* 53–54) immediately after their appearance to Hesiod, and they were not begotten until after Zeus' reign was established.²⁵ Thus, if Hesiod held the belief many attribute to the archaic

²⁴ Stroh (above, note 3) 106, note 103, suggests that there may have been a critical tradition that interpreted *Th.* 27 as indicating an allegorical purpose. While the evidence he cites, Athenagoras *Pro christ.* 24, does not seem very convincing to me, I cannot agree with him that this kind of interpretation of Hesiod is "difficult."

²⁵ The birth of the Muses is also mentioned at 915–17, where it clearly follows the beginning of Zeus' reign, described at 881–85. The problems raised by the Muses' late

Greeks,²⁶ that only an eyewitness can know (*eidenai*) the truth (*alêtheia*), Hesiod's Muses cannot know the truth about most of what they tell Hesiod. His Muses do, however, possess another kind of truth, for they have seen the "ever-existing gods," including Gaia and Ouranos, who are still very powerful forces in the present order of the cosmos.²⁷ Hesiod's Muses, like the mythographers of Plato's ideal state, do not always have eyewitness knowledge, but they do know the truth about the nature of the gods and can therefore tell stories like the truth. They can also, of course, tell the factual truth about what took place after the establishment of Zeus' reign, since they were eyewitnesses of these events.

While we might well be suspicious of this sort of literal reading of a poet who is so notoriously inconsistent and non-literal, in this case the literal reading has some advantages. It is possible that Hesiod, like Plato in the *Timaeus*, wished to avoid claims of factual accuracy in discussing the origins of the gods. *Theogony* 27 might be his way of informing us that the exact truth cannot be known about such matters, but that we can know the present nature of the gods and of the cosmos. This view also makes sense in the light of Hesiod's characterizations of the Muses and of Zeus. Zeus is the basis for justice and order in the cosmos, and Hesiod uses genealogy to express this idea when he makes Zeus the father of Dikê and Eunomia (902).²⁸ To say, then, that the Muses, daughters of Zeus, have not seen and do not know any truth prior to Zeus is to make the point that Zeus is the basis for truth in the world as well as for justice. This is an especially attractive suggestion since truth

birth are discussed by Stroh (above, note 3) 103–6. He mentions (103, note 90) two others who have also noticed the difficulty: H. Fraenkel, *Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums* (Munich 1962) 291 = *Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy*, transl. M. Hadas and J. Willis (New York and London 1973) 254; S. Heitsch, "Das Wissen des Xenophanes," *RhM* 109 (1966) 197. In my view, none of the three gives an adequate account.

²⁶ Among those who see a connection between *alêtheia* and eyewitness knowledge are W. Luther, 'Wahrheit' und 'Lüge' in ältesten Griechentum (Leipzig 1935) 86; H. Fraenkel, *Wege und Formen frühgriechischen Denkens*, ed. Franz Tietze (Munich 1960²) 338–49; rpt. as "Xenophanes' Empiricism and His Critique of Knowledge (B34)," in *The Pre-Socratics*, ed. A. Mourelatos (New York 1974) 118–31; H. Boeder, *Grund und Gegenwart als Frageziel der Früh-Griechischen Philosophie* (The Hague 1962), esp. 7–14; T. Krischer, "ΕΤΥΜΟΣ und ΑΛΗΘΗΣ," *Philologus* 109 (1965) 161–74; B. Snell, "ΑΛΗΘΕΙΑ," in *Festschrift für Ernst Siegmann*, Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft N.F. 1 (1975) 9–17; rpt., with revisions, as "Die Entwicklung des Wahrheitsbegriffs bei den Griechen," in *Der Weg zum Denken und zur Wahrheit*, Hypomnemata 57 (Göttingen 1978) 91–104.

²⁷ See the excellent discussion of the past as integral part of the present cosmos by J.-P. Vernant, "Aspects mythiques de la mémoire en Grèce," *Journal de Psychologie* 1 (1959); rpt. in *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs* (Paris 1965) 85–87.

²⁸ For a good discussion of the philosophical significance of Zeus' marriages and offspring see F. Solmsen, *Hesiod and Aeschylus* (Ithaca 1949) 34–45.

in the *Theogony* is intimately connected with justice. Nereus, for example, is called *apseudea* and *alêthea*, because “he does not forget what is right, but has just and mild counsels” (233–35).²⁹ Seen in this way, Hesiod’s Muses, unlike Plato’s poets, do not lie because of their own fallibility, but because their subject matter, for excellent theological reasons, is not the truth.

Thus, Plato’s view of *Theogony* 27 makes sense of Hesiod and avoids some of the problems of modern interpretations. On this account, Hesiod says exactly what he means: the Muses, his Muses, are both lying poets and speakers of the truth. These two functions, however, do not produce confusion or ambiguity, but clearly mark off two different kinds of subject matter. On this interpretation, the Proem of the *Theogony* does not open with an attack on unnamed rival poets or with vague praise of “fiction,” but with a statement reflecting a view of myth very similar to that of Plato. If Plato’s interpretation of Hesiod is right, both poet and philosopher saw their task as a higher one than that of the historian who records only the bare, observed facts. As Aristotle was to put it: “It is not the task of the poet to record what has happened, but what could happen and is possible in accordance with what is probable (*eikos*) or necessary. . . . For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history, for poetry expresses the universal, history the particular” (*Poetics* 9).³⁰

²⁹ On the connection between truth and justice in the *Theogony* and on Nereus in particular see Luther (above, note 26) 128–29; Diller (above, note 2) 146–47 and 150; Otto (above, note 4) 56; M. Detienne, *Les Maîtres de vérité dans la Grèce archaïque* (Paris 1967; rpt. 1981) 29–50.

³⁰ I am indebted to Jackson Hershbell, Daniel Hooley, and the anonymous referees of *TAPA* for helpful criticisms of an earlier draft of this article and to the editor for his assistance.