

Hesiod is about the most unlikely person in the world to have written poetry. He was a grumpy, misogynistic old farmer living around 700 B.C. in an out-of-the-way part of the Greek world, Askra in Boeotia, which he describes as 'bad in winter, wretched in summer, good at no time'. Yet write he did; apart from lesser works which have not survived he composed two major works, the Theogony and the Works and Days. The latter is nominally addressed to his brother Perses - a "great fool" with whom Hesiod has been having difficulty. It seems they quarreled over their inheritance and Perses, at least at first, got the better of it by currying favour with the arbitrators. But now he's spent all his money in loose living and needs his brother's help. Hesiod's stern lesson is "Work!", which he backs up with moralizing stories about the justice of Zeus and how he punishes the idle and the wicked (especially unfair arbitrators!). The other poem, the Theogony, is the one which captures our attention here. It is an astonishing attempt to explain the origins of the universe and the gods within it; together with Homer's poems it is the fountainhead of Greek mythology.

What possessed Hesiod to embark on this ambitious undertaking, or where he came by his knowledge, we do not know. Of course, Hesiod does say that the Muses met him one day on Mount Helikon and gave him all the inspiration he needed; but we may be allowed to go further than this. Modern investigation shows that many of the details of his stories go way back into the Bronze Age and beyond, back to a time when the Greeks were not yet really identifiable as Greeks. Some details come in as the result of contacts with foreign neighbours, especially in the Near East. Still other details, by contrast, are of comparatively recent origin, and some are doubtless invented by Hesiod himself. He has inherited what is already an amalgam of many different tales and has sought to place his own stamp upon it; he has sought, like many other Greeks after him, to reduce the whole thing to some kind of coherent order. Hesiod is really the western world's first philosopher, for all that he uses myth instead of logic to argue his points.

In the beginning, according to Hesiod, there was chaos, from which all things were born. The word 'chaos' in Greek early acquired a sense of 'lack of order', so Hesiod is saying, quite simply, out of 'lack of order' came 'order'. It is comforting to know that our present world makes some kind of sense and operates according to some set of rules. 'Chaos' originally had another meaning, however, which is 'gap' or 'void'. This reflects Near Eastern antecedents where the conception is that out of some kind of swirl of indeterminate elements - a great primordial fog - there was a space created in which the world could be placed.

Hesiod says that chaos 'gave birth' to the next elements of the universe; myth often expresses what later thinkers refer to as cause and effect in terms of a genealogical relationship, parent and child, or else it says that the two things are 'neighbours'. Out of Chaos came Earth, Tartarus, Erebus, Eros and Night. Of course we start with Mother Earth, the foundation of all we know. Hesiod conceives of her as a broad disk placed in the middle of Chaos. All around her, as yet, is darkness: Night above and Erebus below, which just means 'darkness' in Greek. Hesiod needs this space below, for he needs some place for all the dark, underworld monsters of Greek belief to live. But also he wants a neat, symmetrical picture. Tartarus, however, upsets the nice balance somewhat: it is a dark and gloomy place beneath the earth and seems a doublet to Erebus. It is there because Hesiod knows it as the place where the dreaded Titans are imprisoned, the gods whom Zeus and his

cohorts had to overthrow in order to gain power. So Hesiod is here bowing to the demands of tradition, and mentions in one breath these two infernal locations. We may suppose if we like that 'Erebus' is the name of the whole underworld region whereas 'Tartarus' is one specific place within it.

Eros is present in this early generation for obvious reasons; he is 'love' personified, the power of procreation. We need him around as soon as possible to help keep the ball rolling. Night comes before Day and will give birth to it in due course; it is always nicer to think that light comes out of darkness rather than vice-versa. The ancient Greeks reckoned the start of a new day at night fall, as do many peoples still, for example the Jews.

From here Hesiod proceeds as if building a house. Earth of her own accord (being very fertile) gives birth to Uranus, 'Sky', the mountains, and Pontus, the Sea. In other words the walls and roof are raised and the furniture is moved in. Once the house is built, the people arrive. 'Sky' marries 'Earth' and the generation of the Titans is born. The marriage of 'Sky' and 'Earth' is something you find in many mythologies; it is a personification of the process of rain falling to earth and causing the growth of all living things. The Sky is always male and the Earth female, because she conceives and gives birth.

The Titans are the dark lords of an earlier age who have to be overthrown by the current regime of gods, who are actually their own children. Hesiod here takes over a story pattern known from the Near East, but gives it his own twist. The names of the Titans are provided partly from native Hellenic traditions; some of the Titans were worshipped in cults here and there, while others may preserve memories of the religion of the Minoans, the earlier Aegean civilization that was absorbed by the Greeks. One of the Titans is Ocean, who is a broad stream surrounding the earth; Greeks regarded him as the source of all springs and rivers (which often dive underground in Greece, being a country made up mostly of porous limestone). 'Ocean', therefore, is fresh water, not salt.

The purpose of this so-called 'Succession Myth' is to show that the present order of Zeus and his Olympians is the best of all possible orders; we take great satisfaction in Hesiod's description of the mighty battle in which the lawless and savage Titans are hurled down to Tartarus forever. On the other hand there is a natural tendency everywhere in humankind to regard the past as the 'Good Old Days', and it was an item of Greek belief that the chief Titan, Kronos, ruled over a Golden Age and continued to rule over the Isles of the Blessed, a special place where the most famous heroes lived after death. Hesiod's own belief in a better past is expressed in his story of the Five Ages of Man, respectively Golden, Silver, Bronze, the Age of Heroes, and the Iron Age. The allegory of metals is taken over from Near Eastern sources; the Age of Heroes has been inserted to allow for Greek legends about the heroes who fought at Troy and Thebes. The Iron Age in which we all live now (and historically the discovery of iron smelting techniques did usher in a new age in Greece about 1200) is characterized by hard work and misery. Would I had been born earlier, says Hesiod, or else later - he hopes the Golden Age will return; hope springs eternal in the human breast, a more recent poet says.

By comparison with other accounts of creation, Hesiod's is characterized by its concern for symmetry, its desire to find a place for everything and leave nothing out of account, and its attempt to get right back to the very source and cause of everything. In the Finnish epic Kalevala, for example, we begin with the 'Virgin of the Air' swimming about in the sea for 700 years. Where this Virgin came from - indeed, where the air and sea came from - is not explained. Hesiod gives us all

this, showing already the characteristics that made the Greeks mathematicians and philosophers. But curiously the one thing he does not give us is the origin of man. His story of the Five Ages is not quite the same thing as telling the origin of the first man and the multiplication of the species thereafter. The Greeks in fact never concerned themselves too much about this question; they had several different ideas about it and never tried to sort them out. For them mankind was just here and had better spend his time coping with the difficult conditions of his existence. It is with these conditions that the really great myths of Greek literature - Homer and the tragedians - concern themselves. The Greeks never felt that man was at the center of the universe; he was really a feeble and unimportant creature as far as the gods were concerned. But precisely because of this understanding the Greeks were free to devote themselves intensely to the question of how we should live together. That is why they are great political and ethical thinkers. Hesiod thundered at poor Perses about justice and work; his countrymen were still pondering these and similar questions hundreds of years later, when Plato, for example, wrote the whole of his masterpiece The Republic to answer the single question: 'What is justice?' Good question.