HESIOD’S PROEM AND PLATO’S ION

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‘... trace the Muses upward to their spring’ (Alexander Pope)

1. HESIOD’S PRESENCE IN THE ION

Plato’s Hesiod is a neglected topic, scholars having long regarded Plato’s Homer as a more promising field of inquiry.¹ My aim in this chapter is to demonstrate that this particular bias of scholarly attention, although understandable, is unjustified. Of no other dialogue is this truer than of the Ion.

Admittedly, it is all too easy to relegate Hesiod to the background of the Ion. He is named only six times in the dialogue, being associated each time with Homer, who is named on no fewer than forty-eight occasions. The dialogue contains no quotations from Hesiod, as opposed to five substantial quotations from the Homeric poems.² Right at the start, Socrates

¹ A recent and most welcome exception to this trend is G.R. Boys-Stones and G.H. Haubold edd., Plato and Hesiod (Oxford, 2010).
² This statistic is not as significant as might at first appear since Plato rarely quotes from Hesiod and, when he does so, it is mostly from the Works and Days. The Platonic corpus as a whole contains only one quotation from the Theogony (Symp. 178 b5-7). For a detailed study of Plato’s quotations from, and references to, Hesiod, see Hesiod, Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia, edited and translated by G. W. Most (Cambridge Mass., 2006), 243-44
is made to describe Homer, whether or not in earnest, as ‘the best and most divine of poets’ (530 b9-10), while Ion’s repeated expression of professional enthusiasm for Homer to the exclusion of any other poet is the cornerstone of the entire argument. More generally, throughout the dialogue, Homer’s epics are consistently treated as paradigmatic of the seduction as well as the danger of poetry, of its power to enrapport as well as its tendency to put the mind to sleep. No doubt, such apparently strong Homeric bias accounts for the alternative title given to the Ion in antiquity, On the Iliad.

If the author of the Iliad and the Odyssey is the dominant poetic figure of the Ion, does it mean that Hesiod’s status in the dialogue is merely that of an ‘also ran’, whose main role in the argument is to be a foil to his more illustrious predecessor? And, if Hesiod does serve as a foil, is the point that his poetry is immune to the arguments that Socrates levels at poetry in general and Homer’s epics in particular? Not so, I would claim. Notwithstanding appearances to the contrary, the consistently anti-poetry stance adopted by the Platonic Socrates in the Ion makes the poetry of Hesiod, like that of other poets, as much the butt of Socrates’ objections as Homer’s own. If Homeric references are preponderant in the dialogue, it is because Ion is a Homeric rhapsode, who, as such, believes that Homer’s poetry is better suited than Hesiod’s to rhapsodic performances. This being so, the most effective strategy for Socrates to use in the circumstances is to direct his arguments at the poetry that

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3 As argued by B. Graziosi in ‘Hesiod in Classical Athens: Orators and Platonic Discourse’ in Boys-Stones and Haubold edd. (n. 1), at 129.

4 For general references to poets in general at the start of the dialogue, see 531c2-3, d4, 532a5, b4, b6, b9 and c7-8.
Ion is most familiar with. But this does not mean that Homer’s poetry is the sole target of Socrates’ objections. As the dialogue unfolds, it becomes progressively clearer that, for Socrates, ‘Homer’ is not only the poet whose songs Ion specialises in reciting, but also the very emblem of poetry and that his poems, therefore, are paradigmatic of the whole genre. In the context of the Ion, to attack Homer is to attack poetry in general.

A first sign that Socrates takes Hesiod’s poems to be as vulnerable to his objections as Homer’s own emerges from the question that he puts to Ion in 531 c1-d2, a question in which the Homeric bias that had so far characterised the discussion is being challenged:

‘How can it be that you are skilled in Homer, but not in Hesiod or the other poets? Or does Homer deal with different topics from all the other poets? Has he not mostly treated of war and the ways human beings associate with each other - good men and bad men, in their private and professional capacity - and of the ways the gods interact with each other and with human beings, and of the vicissitudes of the heavenly and chthonian deities, as well as of the origin of gods and heroes? Are these not the themes of Homer’s poetry? ... And what of the other poets? Do they not treat of the same themes?\(^5\)

Socrates’ question invites an affirmative answer, and Ion, predictably enough, obliges, although he feels compelled to insist, not for the first time, that Homer handles all of the above themes better than any other poet (531 d3-10). To be sure, Socrates’ list of common poetic themes is particularly well suited to Homer’s poetry, but it none the less fits Hesiod’s

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\(^5\) All quotations from the Ion are in the edition of A. Rijksbaron, *Plato Ion Or: On the Iliad*, edited with Introduction and Commentary (Leiden and Boston, 2007). The lineation differs slightly from that of Burnet (1903). All translations from the dialogue are my own.
own. Indeed, while the generation of deities from primeval chaos, and the ensuing dynastic conflicts and internecine battles largely fill the *Theogony*, the gnomic poetry of the *Works and Days*, although it is dominated by moral exhortations and technical guidance of various kinds, is yet not short of reflections on such interactions as take place between gods, kings and mere mortals.

However, Hesiod’s place in the argument of the *Ion* is not to be established principally on the basis of Socrates’ unexceptionable contention that Homer and Hesiod deal with similar themes. Far more significant for the present inquiry is the account that Hesiod gives of his initiation to poetry in the proem to the *Theogony*. Since this account is the earliest and most detailed to have come down to us from the archaic period, it cannot but constitute a prime source for a study of the roots of Plato’s poetics. My claim in the present paper is that Socrates’ critique of poetry in the *Ion* is directed, to a not inconsiderable extent, at the account of the impulse to poetic composition that Hesiod provides in the proem. Before turning to the justification of this claim, however, I want to register a methodological caveat. The one hundred and three lines of the proem to the *Theogony* are amongst the most discussed in the canon, and the enormous secondary literature that they have generated in the last hundred years or so suggests that, as things stand, complete scholarly agreement over their interpretation is unlikely to be reached. Although it is impossible to deal, however indirectly, with these lines without siding for some interpretations over others, the pages that follow are not intended, in the main, to be a contribution to the debates surrounding the interpretation of the proem. If I venture to enter into these debates at all, it is with the sole aim of setting the scene for the study of what I claim to be the Hesiodic background to the *Ion*. Since I shall approach the proem from the vantage point of Plato’s likely reaction to it, my remarks will inevitably be teleologically slanted. My main concern will be with Plato’s interpretation of
the proem rather than with the proem itself. Admittedly, we shall never know just how Plato read the proem, but this does not mean that we cannot reasonably speculate as to how the Plato of the dialogues, who repeatedly and variously expressed concern over the power of poetry, would have interpreted the lines in which Hesiod tells the story of his initiation to poetry.

2. THE DICTERWEIHE

The proem to the Theogony is a self-contained narrative in which Hesiod recalls, amongst other things, how the Muses made him a composer of songs. Although the invocation to the Muses that follows the proem (lines 104-15) is conventional in the sense of being on a par with Homeric appeals to the Muses for assistance, the proem itself is markedly different from anything that can be found in the Iliad or the Odyssey; it is relatively long, self-consciously autobiographical in part and, so at least it appears at first sight, deliberately mystifying. It also shows an unexpected - and un-Homeric - degree of familiarity with the Muses: we are told who they are, where they live, what they do, why they do what they do and how their characteristic activity affects gods and mortals. No doubt, this reflects the fact that Hesiod’s Muses manifested themselves to him in propria persona, as opposed to being disguised, as Homeric deities prefer to be when appearing to mortals. So markedly different overall are the two poets’ respective invocations to the Muse that it turns out to be equally instructive, from the point of view of Plato’s likely reception of Hesiod, to compare the Dichterweihe with the proem in which Parmenides, over two centuries later, introduced his famous dichotomy between ‘the way of truth’ and ‘the opinions of mortals’. Both Hesiod himself and Parmenides’ κοῦρ narrate their encounter with divine beings in the first person singular, both show unusual familiarity with divine abodes and ways, and both are in receipt of divine
teaching. But the differences between the two accounts are even more interesting than the similarities: while Hesiod received the Muses’ instruction passively and from without, Parmenides’ κοῦρος was enlightened partly as a result of his own inclination and unusual worth. While Hesiod’s Muses began by berating him and warned him that the information they were about to impart to him might not unfailingly be true, Parmenides’ goddess was gracious in her promise to teach him ‘the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth’. Lastly and most relevantly to our present purpose, Hesiod, in contrast with the κοῦρος, gave a detailed account of the forces that changed his life and set him out on the road to poetry.

Before his meeting with the Muses, Hesiod, as he recounts in his faux naïf manner, was an uncouth shepherd whose main occupation was to pasture lambs on the slopes of Mount Helicon. At some point (cf. ποτ’, line 22) and for no reason that he feels compelled to look into, he was favoured with a divine epiphany and singled out from the ranks of lowly and uneducated peasants. The Muses, who, as he recalls, had first addressed him in an abrupt and

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6 In D.K. 28 B 1-3 and 28 B 1.29 the κοῦρος explains that the mares had carried him according to his wishes (cf. ἵπποι ταί με φέρονσιν ὄσον τ’ ἐπὶ ῥυμὸς ἰκάνοι) on the road which bears the man who knows (cf. εἰδότα φῶτα) over all cities. Admittedly, the context does not make it entirely clear whether εἰδότα φῶτα refers to the state of the κοῦρος before or after enlightenment. While the textual closeness of ἐπὶ ῥυμὸς and εἰδότα φῶτα would incline one to read the lines as above, it could be argued that line 28, which has the goddess tell the κοῦρος that ‘it is needful that you learn all things’, implies that the road mentioned in line 3 is the road that carries those who have already been enlightened.

7 Ibid., 28 B 29. The fact that εὐκυκλέος in line 29 may be a Neoplatonic interpolation is not relevant to the comparison between the two proems.
abusive fashion, proceeded to ‘teach’ him ‘beautiful song’ (line 22). However, it seems that this was no unmitigated favour on their part since they also took care to warn him that they could, whenever they so chose, ‘tell lies that look like truths’ (l. 27). Having thus intimated that in poetry beauty and veracity do not unfailingly go hand in hand, the Muses presented Hesiod with a branch plucked from a flourishing laurel (line 30) and ‘breathed a divine voice’ into him (lines 31-2). Later in the proem, Hesiod describes the gift of poetry as sacred (cf. ἴσθι δόσις, line 93) and suggests that poets and kings are alone in being favoured in this manner by the Muses.

The thirteen lines (22-34) that constitute the autobiographical section of the proem are the most directly related to the preoccupations that Socrates would later be made to voice in the Ion:

αἱ ὑπὸ σοὶ Ἡσίοδον καλὴν ἐδίδαξαν ἁορίδήν.

ἀρνας ποιμαίνοις Ἑλικόνος ὑπὸ ζαδέοιο.

tόνδε δὲ με πρώτιστα ἦσαὶ πρὸς μūθον ἔσεσθαι.

Μοῦσαι Ὀλυμπιάδες, κοῦραι Διὸς ἀιγόχοιο

“ποιμένες ἀγρουλλοὶ, κάκι ἔλεγχα, γαστέρες οἶον,

ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμωσιν ὁμοία,

ἴδμεν δ’ εὔτε ἐσῆλωμεν ἀληθεῖα γεγόσασθαι.”

ὡς ἔφασαν κοῦραι μεγάλου Διὸς ἀφτιέπειαί,

8 All quotations of Hesiod are in Most’s 2006 rendering (n. 2), with occasional slight modifications, flagged as such.
One time, they [the Muses] taught Hesiod beautiful song while he was pasturing lambs under holy Helikon. And this speech the goddesses spoke first of all to me, the Olympian Muses, the daughters of aegis-holding Zeus: ‘Field-dwelling shepherds, ignoble disgraces, mere bellies: we know how to say many false things similar to genuine ones, but we know, when we wish, how to proclaim true things.’ So spoke great Zeus’ ready-speaking daughters, and they plucked a staff, a branch of luxuriant laurel, a marvel, and gave it to me; and they breathed a divine voice into me, so that I might glorify what will be and what was before, and they commanded me to sing of the race of the blessed ones who always are, but always to sing of themselves first and last.’

3. THE SONG AND THE TEACHING: A FIRST PROBLEM

In order to identify the likely Hesiodic roots of some of Socrates’ most striking claims in the Ion, we need first to take note of two exegetical problems that are internal to the proem. Both occur on line 22: αἵ νῦ ποῦ Ἡσίοδον καλὴν ἐδιδαξαν αἰῶνι. The first problem revolves
around the interpretation of ᾠδή (song), the second around that of ἔδιδαξαν (they taught).

Although the two problems are interrelated, they will, for clarity’s sake, be first considered separately.

First problem: is the ᾠδή that Hesiod learnt from the Muses the art of song in general or is it the particular song that is being introduced in the proem, namely the Theogony? If ᾠδή denotes the art of song in general, then the Muses’s teaching left Hesiod capable of composing, not only the Theogony, but also any song that he might afterwards have wished to turn his hand to. If, on the other hand, ᾠδή specifically denotes the Theogony, then the teaching that Hesiod received at the time of the epiphany is better thought of as an isolated episode, which might - or might not - recur. Although seemingly trivial, the question is directly related to the thesis that Socrates is made to defend in the central speech of the Ion, namely a poet’s inability to compose beautiful songs without divine assistance. Indeed if, at

9 To avoid importing anachronistic assumptions in the discussion of the proem, I have mostly used ‘song’, ‘song composition’ and ‘composer’, as opposed to ‘poetry’, ‘poem’ and ‘poet’, to refer to the Theogony and Hesiod’s authorship of it. Not only does Plato use ᾠδή, ὡδή and ἄοιদος sparingly, but, when he does so, it is mostly in contexts dealing with early poetry, as testified by Phaedrus 237 a7, 259 b6-8 and 278 c1-3. He never uses the terms in the Ion. In other dialogues, he generally prefers to use ποίησις and ποιητής. From Diotima’s remarks on the semantic range of ποίησις and ποιητής (Symp., 205 b8-c9), it seems clear that Plato was aware of the etymology of the words. On the significance of the passage in the Symposium, see S. Stern-Gillet, ‘Poets and other makers’, Dionysius XXVI, Dec. 2008, 9-27, at 17-19. On terminological shifts from archaic usage to 4th century B.C. manner of referring to poetry, see N. Notomi, ‘Image-Making in Republic X and the Sophist’ in P. Destrée and F.-G. Herrmann edd., Plato and the Poets (Brill, 2011), 299-307.
the time described in the proem, Hesiod was set on the path of poetry *tout court*, his need of the Muses will not have outlasted the epiphany and he truly is the author of the compositions traditionally credited to his name. On the other hand, if it was only the *Theogony* that the Muses taught Hesiod at that point, then this particular epic might be more appropriately described, in Tynnichus’ words, as reported by the Platonic Socrates, as a ‘discovery’ of the Muses than as Hesiod’s own work.\(^\text{10}\) An alternative way of phrasing the problem involved in identifying the referent, generic or specific, of ἀοιδή would thus be to ask whose voice we hear when we listen to a rhapsode reciting the *Theogony*. Is it Hesiod’s own or the Muses’? Or could it possibly be a combination of both?

Unfortunately, neither the immediate context of the proem nor the larger context of early poetic usage yields a straightforward answer to the question. In Homeric poetry, ἀοιδή sometimes denotes a specific song, such as the song that the Sirens sung in the hope of luring Odysseus to shipwreck on their island or Phemius’ lament over the Achaeans’ delayed homecoming,\(^\text{11}\) while, at other times, referring to the art of song in general, such as was divinely bestowed on the Pheacian bard Demodocus.\(^\text{12}\) In the Homeric hymns, on the other hand, the generic use of ἀοιδή preponderates over the specific use.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{\text{10}}\) *Ion*, 534 d8-e1: εὕρημα τι Μοισάν (a discovery of the Muses) is Socrates’ phrase to describe the only good poem ever composed by Tynnichus. See also ibid., 534 e2-4.

\(^{\text{11}}\) *Od.* 12.44, 183 and 198. See also ibid., I.351; 12.183 and 198 and 24.439.

\(^{\text{12}}\) Ibid. 8.498.

\(^{\text{13}}\) For the generic use of ἀοιδή, see, e.g., *Hymn to Hermes* 149 and 442 and *Hymn to Apollo* 169 and 519. For the specific use, see, e.g., *Hymn to Apollo*, 172-73 and *Hymn to Asclepius*, 5.
Being specific and generic in turn, Hesiod’s own use of ἀοιδή is as fluid as Homer’s. Thus in the renewed invocation to the Muses in lines 104-5 of the Theogony, ἀοιδή is most naturally read as referring to the particular song that Hesiod is about to recite: ‘Hail, children of Zeus, and give me lovely song; glorify the sacred race of the immortals who always are’. Likewise, in lines 658-62 of the Works and Days, a passage that will presently be considered in more detail, it denotes the particular section of the work that immediately follows in the text. But there are also passages, in the proem and elsewhere, in which ἀοιδή is unambiguously generic. For instance, in line 60 of the proem (‘she [Mnemosyne] bore nine maidens, like-minded ones, who in their breasts care for song’) and in line 917 of the Theogony (‘they [the Muses] delight in festivities and the pleasure of song’), ἀοιδή refers to the object of the Muses’ delight, namely song in general.

Unsurprisingly, the ambiguity of ἀοιδή in early poetic usage has been the occasion of scholarly disagreements over the interpretation of line 22 of the proem. While recent interpreters have tended to favour a generic reading,14 many an earlier interpreter, from Lucian of Samosata in the first century CE to Thalmann in 1984, took the word to be meant

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14 See, e.g, W.J. Verdenius, ‘Notes on the Proem of Hesiod’s Theogony’, Mnemosyne (1972, series IV, 25), 233, n. 22 and A. Rijksbaron, ‘Discourse Cohesion in the Proem to Hesiod’s Theogony’, in S. Bakker and G. Bakker edd., Discourse Cohesion in Ancient Greek (Leiden/Boston, Brill), 2009, at 248-49. In his 2006 translation of the line (‘they [the Muses] taught Hesiod beautiful song’) Most avoids placing either a definite or an indefinite article in front of ‘song’; although this suggests a generic reading, it does not unambiguously do so. The issue is further discussed in section 6 below.
specifically. Lucian’s interpretation of the line is particularly relevant to the present context: it show that the specific reading of ἀοιδή had currency in antiquity and it combines that reading with a deflationary account of the creative process. Admittedly, Lucian’s Conversation with Hesiod is a short and light-hearted piece which makes no claims to scholarship. But its main value for modern-day interpreters is that of showing that line 22 of the proem could be read nas referring only to the Theogony at a time when Hesiod’s writings were sufficiently well-known to be objects of satire. The summary of the proem, with which the dialogue begins, has a fictional Lycinus apostrophise Hesiod with an allusion to lines 22 to 32 of the proem: τί δὴπτε προειπὼν ὑπὲρ σαντού ώς διὰ τοῦτο λάβοις τὴν θεσπάσιον ἐκείνην ὑδὴν παρὰ τῶν θεῶν ὅπως κλείσαι καὶ ἰμνοίης τὰ πασοληψίντα καὶ θεσπίζοις τὰ ἐσόμενα (‘How come that you claim on your own behalf that you had received that divine song from heaven so that you might sing the praises of the past and prophesy the future?’).

The use of the demonstrative ἐκείνην before ὑδὴν is evidence enough that Lucian took Hesiod’s ἀοιδή in line 22 to refer to the Theogony rather than to the entirety of Hesiod’s

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16 Lucian, Conversation with Hesiod, 1. 6-7, in Lucian, vol. 6 (Cambridge Mass., 1959), translated by K. Kilburn. All quotations from Lucian are in Kilburn’s translation, with occasional slight modifications, flagged as such.

17 Ibid., 1. I have modified Kilburn’s translation to render ti dépote which is clearly interrogative although there is no question mark at the end of the very long sentence in which it occurs.
literary production. So certain indeed was Lucian that the phrase καλὴν ... ἀοιδήν was meant specifically that, in his paraphrase of lines 31-2 (which in most manuscripts of the *Theogony* read ἐνέπνεσαν δὲ μοι αὐτὴν Ἡσίπνα, ‘they breathed a divine voice into me’), he wrote Ἑσπέσιον ἐκέννην ὀδὴν (‘that divine song’). Lucian’s paraphrase may, in turn, have been the source of the reading ἀοιδήν (rather than αὐτὴν on line 31), in some of our manuscripts as well as in various places of the indirect tradition.¹⁸

Even more significant in the present context is the deflationary account of Hesiod’s authorship of the *Theogony* that Lucian combines with his interpretation of the autobiographical section of the proem. Assuming that ἀοιδή in line 22 refers to the *Theogony*, as opposed to the entirety of Hesiod’s literary output, Lucian inferred that the true poetic voice in the epic is the Muse’s rather than Hesiod’s own. Having made his semi-fictional Hesiod admit that ‘the goddesses give their gifts to whom they will and for as long as they think it proper’, he had his fictional Lycinus remark to Hesiod ‘... there, my admirable Hesiod, speaks the true shepherd; you seem to be truly inspired by the Muses, when you yourself cannot even make a defence of your own work’,¹⁹ before concluding the *Conversation* with the following barb: ‘... you knew nothing of what you said; it was some divine inspiration filled you with your verses.’²⁰

¹⁸ There are, of course, other possibilities: it may be that the variant reading was already in Lucian’s text of Hesiod or that the variant in the manuscript and Lucian’s paraphrase arose independently of each other. The source of the variant, however, is less relevant to the present context than its very existence.

¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

²⁰ Ibid., 9.
Lycinus’ taunts are reminiscent of various Socratic claims: the claim in the *Ion* that poets need to be put out of their mind and inspired by a deity before being able to compose\(^\text{21}\) and the claim in the *Apology* that the phenomenon of divine inspiration makes it well nigh impossible for poets, not only to make a defence of their own works, but even to know what they said in their writings.\(^\text{22}\) There is, of course, no hard evidence to suggest that Lucian deliberately sought to echo Socrates’ remarks in the *Apology*, but his general interest in philosophy as well as his bent for satire make it highly probable that, in common with most other writers of the so-called *Second Sophistic*, he was well acquainted with Plato’s dialogues.

4. **THE SONG AND THE TEACHING: A SECOND PROBLEM**

The second exegetical problem raised by lines 22-34 concerns Hesiod’s use of διδάσκειν. How, in his account, did the Muses teach him? The frequent conjunction of διδάσκειν and ἀοιδή in archaic contexts dealing with the composition of fine poetry complicates the issue by making it virtually impossible to determine the exact meaning of either term in abstraction from the other. Indeed, when ἀοιδή is used generically (or is thought to be so used), the teaching of it cannot but consist (or be thought to consist) in either a period of practice or the bestowal of a gift or talent.

The proem is a particularly telling example of the semantic interrelation between διδάσκειν and ἀοιδή. Did Hesiod believe that the Muses’ ‘teaching’ had consisted in training

\(^{21}\) *Ion*, 533 d2-3.

\(^{22}\) *Apology*, 22 a-c. See also *Meno*, 96 a.
him in the craft of song composition, as West tentatively suggests, or, as other commentators have thought, in bestowing poetic talent upon him? If the former, then his concept of teaching can be assumed roughly to match our own, according to which ‘teaching’ denotes the successful transmission of knowledge (or a skill), which the learner is thereafter capable of using or exercising at will. Being dispositional and under the control of the successful student, the ability taught is long term and likely therefore to account for the entirety of a composer’s literary output. If, on the other hand, Hesiod thought that the Muses’ teaching had consisted in a bestowal, then his concept of teaching significantly differs from ours, and we must take care to avoid such anachronism as would result from projecting our modern notion upon the text of the proem. A bestowal is a performative action, undertaken at a particular moment in time, at the sole initiative of the bestower and involving no corresponding activity on the part of the recipient. Teaching so conceived can be compared to handing out a gift without telling the recipient how to use it or how long it will remain in his possession.

On the other hand, when the ἄοιδη in question is (or is thought to be) a particular song, the concept of teaching becomes no less puzzling to modern minds. How, it will be asked, can the composition of a single song, however long and intricate, be the object of divine teaching? Or could Hesiod have taken the Muses to have sung the Theogony to him, so that he could memorize it for later recitations to human audiences? If so, his use of the terminology of teaching in this particular case would appear to be best interpreted as a

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24 See note 12 above.
metaphor for an external force which comes over the unsuspecting pupil from outside and exerts its influence for a limited period of time in order to enable the favoured pupil to memorize (or write) the song in question.

Which conception of teaching does Hesiod rely on in the proem? The use of the adverb πότε (‘at some point’) in line 22, to refer to some unspecified time in the past, might possibly suggest that, in his view, the Muses’ teaching did not take the form of ‘a period of practice’. However, evidence more substantial than the presence of a temporal adverb in the line in question must be sought in order to determine whether, or to what extent, Hesiod believed that the Muses had made him a craftsman capable of composing at will or a mostly passive recipient of a mysterious gift that enabled him to transmit divine messages to human audiences. This issue is crucial to our dialogue, which has Socrates deny the mental alertness and cognitive competence of inspired poets and, even more pointedly, describe as a ‘discovery’ of the Muse the single good paean ever composed by Tynnichus, an otherwise mediocre poet.

To inject some clarity into the issue, let us, in the first instance, turn to the Homeric poems. ‘Διδάσκειν’, we there find, generally denotes the divine bestowal of a highly prized ability upon a human being. Thus in the Iliad, Artemis teaches Scamandrios the art of hunting while Zeus and Poseidon teach Antilochos the art of horsemanship.\(^\text{25}\) How such skills, which are normally acquired by training and practice, can be instantaneously inculcated, yet remain lifelong, is never explained. In so far as poetic talent, unlike these skills, can be argued to be innate, one might be inclined to put a metaphorical interpretation upon Homer’s description

\(^{25}\) Il., 5. 51 and 23. 307-308.
of Demodocus as god-taught. Homer’s occasional use of δίδωμι (to give, to grant) to refer to the bard’s ‘god-given’ talent suggests that he may have taken the two verbs to be semantically interchangeable. Seen in this light, Homer’s habit of ascribing Demodocus’ talent to the teaching (or bounty) of the Muses would be comparable to a modern description of, say, a brilliant musician as ‘having been endowed with the gift of music’. However, since the nature of Homeric metaphors is not directly germane to the present topic, let us be content with the modest conclusion that Homer’s concept of teaching, as applied to song composition, is as simple as it is intriguing: he took the divine bestowal of the gift of poetry to be both a necessary and a sufficient condition for the presence in a bard of exceptional and enduring talent.

Hesiod’s concept of divine teaching, at least as far as the composition of songs is concerned, was more complex than Homer’s. Take the lines 658-62 of the Works and Days in which he recalls his only sea-faring voyage, from Aulis to Euboea, undertaken to attend the funeral games of Amphidamas in Chalcis.

τὸν μὲν ἔγω Μοῦσῆς ’Ελικωνιάδεσσ’ ἀνέβηκα,

ἐνθά με τὸ πρῶτον λυρικῆς ἐπέβησαν ἀοιδῆς.

τὸσσον τοι γηῶν γε πεπείρημαι πολυγόμφων·

ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅς ἔρεω Ζηνὸς νόσαν αἰγιόχοιο.

26 Od., 8. 41 and 481. The metaphorical interpretation is defended by, e.g., L.H. Pratt, Lying and Poetry from Homer to Pindar: Falsehood and Deception in Archaic Greek Poetry. Falsehood and Deception in Archaic Greek Poetics. (Ann Arbor, 1993), 50-52. The fact that δίδωμι was still used by St Paul (I Cor. XII. 7-12) to refer to divinely granted abilities testifies to the longevity of the expression.
Μοῦσαι γὰρ μ’ ἐδίδαξαν ἀθέσφατον ὑμνὸν ἀείδειν.

‘This I dedicated to the Heliconian Muses, where they first set me upon the path of clear-sounding song. This is as much experience of many-bolted ships as I have acquired: yet even so I shall speak forth the mind of aegis-holding Zeus, for the Muses taught me to sing a hymn of transcendent merit.’

Lines 658-59 contain a reference to the opening of the proem to the Theogony, in which Hesiod expresses his gratitude to the Heliconian Muses for having made him a composer of songs, thus bestowing upon him a talent that he takes to be dispositional. Line 660 records the bald fact of Hesiod’s lack of sea-faring experience. Lines 661-62 state that, in spite of his lack of sea-faring experience, Hesiod was able to celebrate Zeus’ mastery over wind and sea because the Muses had ‘taught’ him to sing a ‘hymn of transcendent merit.’ While the Muses’ had earlier bestowed upon him the capacity to compose ‘clear-sounding song’, they had, more recently, it seems, ‘taught’ (cf. ἐδίδαξαν) him such knowledge of the conditions of navigation as he needed to compose the hymn mentioned in line 662, a hymn that would otherwise have transcended human capacities. At first reading, one might take Hesiod’s expression of double indebtedness to the Muses as a case of over-determination and wonder why, after first (cf. πρῶτον) being blessed with the talent to write beautiful verse, he also needed to be ‘taught’ the individual hymn referred to in line 662? What can be the value of a

27 I have altered Most’s translation (n. 2) of ἀθέσφατον ὑμνὸν as ‘an inconceivable hymn’ to ‘a hymn of transcendent merit’. While both translations accord with the definition of ἀθέσφατος as ‘qui n’est pas fixé par les dieux, qui échappe à toute règle’, given by P. Chantraine in his Dictionnaire Etymologique de la Langue Grecque. Histoire des Mots, (Paris, 1968-1974), tome 2, s.v. ἄθεσφατος, my rendering, though hardly elegant, is more transparently descriptive.
divinely bestowed capacity, one may wonder, if the recipient cannot exercise it at will without requiring a further dose of divine assistance?

For an answer to these questions, let us turn to Hesiod’s intricate account of how the Muses’ intervention in his life enabled him to write the *Theogony*. As he tells the story, Hesiod’s transformation from shepherd to poet (‘One time, the Muses taught Hesiod beautiful song’, line 22) would appear to involve the following three stages: (1) the Muses berated him for his sloth and low aspirations (line 24); (2) they gave him a staff made of laurel (line 30); and (3) they breathed a divine voice into him (line 31). The account is far from straitforward. If, as it seems we must, we assume that the laurel staff symbolises poetic talent, why do the Muses have in addition to breathe a divine voice into him? More generally, how do the stages relate to one another: are they listed in no particular order or do they record a progression, chronological or other, which culminates in the composition of the *Theogony*? If so, what is the rationale of the progression?

5. RIJKSBARON’S HYPOTHESIS

A recently published grammatical study of the proem has brought elements of answer to these questions. In his 2009 analysis of the temporal and spatial coordinates in the proem, Albert Rijksbaron has laid the ground for a novel interpretation of the narrative structure of the proem. Attention to the grammar of the passage has enabled him, not only to show that the proem is more cohesive than had so far been recognised, but also to provide a framework for a better understanding of the conception of divine teaching expressed in it. In the pages that

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28 See section 6 below.

29 Rijksbaron in Bakker S. and Bakker G. edd. (n. 13), at 243-44.
follow I shall draw on two salient points of his analysis in order to articulate Hesiod’s concept of teaching and to highlight the gap that separates it from Plato’s. Like Rijksbaron, I shall proceed on the assumption that the three aspects (or parts) of the Muses’ teaching are related logically rather than chronologically.

Rijksbaron’s first and crucial step is to challenge the accepted reading of the first twenty-one lines of the proem. In his seminal commentary of 1966, West had interpreted the lines as an account of the ‘timeless’ activities of the Muses, activities which he elsewhere describes as ‘habitual’. 30 Although West’s use of ‘timeless’ was intended as a grammatical category, to account for the mix of present and past tenses in the first twenty-one lines of the proem, 31 it left unresolved the issue as to whether the dance of the Muses was to be thought of as timeless or iterative. The issue matters, Rijksbaron claimed, since it is a matter of logic that the dance described in lines 1 to 9 could not be ‘timeless’ sensu stricto since it is at some point to enter the inevitably tensed consciousness of the poet. Rather than taking place outside time, Rijksbaron argued, the dance of the Muses must be conceived as everlasting or, in his preferred terminology, ‘omnitemporal’. 32 To account for the shift from ‘omnitemporal’

30 For ‘timeless’ see West (n. 22), at 155; for ‘habitual’, see ibid., at 150.

31 As testified by his note on ἐνεποιήσαντο on line 7, in ibid., 155.

32 Although Rijksbaron’s objection is telling against modern descriptions of the Muses’ dance as ‘timeless’, it has to be pointed out that the concept of timelessness (as opposed to everlastingness) was long in emerging in Greek thought. Plato’s description of time as ‘an everlasting image of eternity’ in the Timaeus 37 d5 and his analysis of change in the Parmenides 155 e-157 b show the difficulties involved in formulating the concept of timelessness as different from everlastingness. It is unlikely therefore that, some three centuries before Plato, Hesiod could have made a distinction between eternity (or
(or tenseless) to tensed narrative, Rijksbaron turns from logic to grammar. The shift occurs, he argues, not indeed with the occurrence of ποϕ’ ἔδιδαζαν in line 22, but earlier in the proem, with the occurrence of the imperfect στείχον (they walked) in line 10. At that point, the scene, which had first been described from an impersonal and ‘omnitemporal’ perspective, becomes anchored in a precise moment in the past, the moment at which the epiphany occurred. While remaining the omniscient narrator that he had been from the start, Hesiod now includes in his narrative an episode in which he introduces himself as the hero in the story.

In any case, Hesiod’s claim that the Muses gladden the heart of Zeus by ‘telling of what is and what will be and what was before’ shows that he had no conception of timelessness, as opposed to sempiternity.

33 στείχον, the imperfect of στείχω, is translated by Most as ‘they walk’, presumably to convey what, in common with West, he takes to be the timelessness of the scene. Rijksbaron, in accordance with his interpretation of στείχον in line 10 as a focalising imperfect, follows C.J. Ruijgh, Autour du “te” épique (Amsterdam: A.M. Hakkert), 1971, 900-901, in taking it to express a past occurrence. As for the two aorist indicatives in lines 7 and 8 (ἐπεποίησαντο and ἐπεπιστάντο), both authors take them to mark the gradual transition from the ‘omnitemporal’ state of affairs described in the first six lines of the proem to the tensed event denoted by στείχον.

34 In Rijksbaron’s own words: ‘the third person narrative of lines 10-23 becomes a first person narrative and thus the report of a personal experience’, (n. 13), at p. 245. On this point, see also J.S. Clay, Hesiod’s Cosmos (Cambridge, 2003), p. 54.
The shift is brought about by the use of the imperfect στείχον to describe the scene as perceived by Hesiod in his capacity as hero of the story. In grammatical terms, this means that στείχον ‘should be taken as a “focalising” imperfect, that is, an imperfect which presents a certain state of affairs from the point of view of a character rather than that of the narrator.’ It marks the moment at which the habitual activities of the Muses began to impinge on the consciousness of Hesiod (the narrator) and thereby prepares the way for the transformation from shepherd to poet that Hesiod (the hero of the story) is about to undergo. Against the background of the Muses’ ‘omnitemporal’ dancing and singing, as described in lines 11 to 21, Hesiod (the narrator) proceeds to identify the moment in time at which the Muses made themselves perceptible to Hesiod (the hero of the story) and ‘taught’ him ‘beautiful song’: αἵ νύ ποίησεν Ἡσίοδον καλὴν ἔδιδαξαν ἀοιδήν (line 22). So artfully did Hesiod introduce the change of narrative perspective that it long escaped the attention of commentators. Yet the transition from impersonal and ‘omnitemporal’ discourse to autobiographical and historically embedded story constitutes the very hub of the proem. It enabled Hesiod smoothly to guide his audience’s attention from the impersonal description of the Muses to the story of his own transformation from shepherd to composer of songs.

Yet, for all Hesiod’s artistry, line 22, which marks the beginning of the Dichterweihe, proves to be the most exegetically problematic of all since, as noted above, it is there that the cohesiveness of the narrative threatens to break down, and Hesiod’s conception of divine teaching to show severe signs of strain. To demonstrate the consistency of the thirteen lines of the Dichterweihe, Rijksbaron, in the second step of his analysis, turns to ἔδιδαξαν. In the context of the proem, so he argues, ἔδιδαξαν is a complexive aorist, that is an aorist which

35 Rijksbaron (n. 13), at 245.
encompasses the several facets of the complex action described in the lines that follow. Its function in the proem is to provide the context in which the Muses’ actions, as expressed by ἔστησαν, ἔδωκαν and ἐπενεκαίνα (lines 24-31), took place. This step is crucial to Rijksbaron’s demonstration since it enables him to argue that, far from disparate, the three acts in question were in reality linked stages in a single process. Transposed into non grammatical language, this means that the Muses’ admonishment, gift of laurel and afflatus, rather than being on a par with their teaching, as traditionally thought, were in reality three different stages or aspects of their teaching. The Muses, in other words, taught Hesiod by admonishing him, giving him a staff of laurel and breathing a divine voice into him.

6. THE THREE FACETS OF THE MUSES’ TEACHING

Rijksbaron’s construal of ἔδιδαξαν as a complexive aorist, although it cannot be proved to be the only possible interpretation, clarifies a number of issues in the Dichterweihe. To begin with, it makes the Muses’ remonstrance on line 25 less cryptic than it would otherwise be. Indeed, once it is realised that their reproof is addressed to a prospective pupil, as opposed to someone who has already been taught, it becomes clear that what the Muses are doing at this

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37 In enhancing the cohesiveness of the proem, Rijksbaron’s interpretation also abides by the principle of charity, as famously defined by D. Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford, 1974), chapter 3, passim, according to which exegesis should aim at maximizing the truth, rationality and coherence of the target text.
point is to prepare Hesiod for the life change that he is about to undergo.\textsuperscript{38} From being a rustic, with the interests and preoccupations of a rustic, he is to be granted the talent and the knowledge to sing of the past and the future (line 32) and to celebrate the race of the everlasting gods (line 33). The Muses’ gift, as Hesiod will claim later, made him the equal of kings (lines 80-97). To mark the beginning of what will be for him a superior form of life - an image of the life that they themselves lead - the Muses emphasize how mediocre had been the way of life he had thus far been content with. Having dissociated their prospective pupil from his former manner of existence, the Muses proceed with his transformation from shepherd to composer of songs by handing him a staff taken from a luxuriant laurel bush.

As will be recalled, the laurel was the sacred tree of the leader of the Muses, Apollo, whose gifts were believed to include prophecy and poetry.\textsuperscript{39} The Pythian priestess at Delphi used laurel, either to hold in her hand while giving out oracles or to chew its leaves in order to induce a prophetic trance that would enable her to foretell the future. The Homeric figure of the seer Calchas further testifies to the belief in the Apollonian origin of the power of prophecy: in lines that would later find an echo in Hesiod’s proem, Homer describes how the seer, who had received from Apollo the gift of knowing ‘the things that are, will be and were

\textsuperscript{38} For an interesting discussions of rival interpretations of this puzzling line, see J.T. Katz and K. Volk, ‘Mere Bellies?, ‘A new Look at Theogony 26-8’, \textit{JHS} 120 (2000), 122-131, at 129, who claim that, in addressing Hesiod as \(\gamma\alpha\sigma\tau\iota\varphi\), the Muses refer to ‘the belly as a locus of inspiration or possession.’ This interpretation, however, strains credibility since it is unlikely that the Muses would belittle the gift they were about to bestow upon Hesiod.

\textsuperscript{39} As testified by, e.g., the \textit{Hymn to Apollo}, lines 131-32 and 172-173 (which is probably a laudatory reference to Homer). See also E.R. Dodds, \textit{The Greeks and the Irrational} (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1951), p. 73.
before’, 40 was able to foretell the length of the Trojan war by interpreting a portent that had remained opaque to the rest of the gathering.41 As for composers and rhapsodes, they, too, were traditionally believed to have received their respective gift from Apollo and the Muses: ‘it is from the Muses and far-shooting Apollo’, Hesiod wrote in the proem, ‘that men are poets on earth and lyre-players.’ (lines 94-95). As a symbol of such Apollonian connection, composers and rhapsodes held a laurel staff while engaged in public recitations.42 Since these passages suggest that the powers of prophecy and song composition, although originating in the same deities, were not usually vested in the same individuals, it is intriguing to see Hesiod, later in the proem, claim to have received both kinds of power from Apollo and the Muses.

The well attested mythological association of the laurel with Apollo and the Muses makes it clear that the staff handed out to Hesiod symbolises poetic talent. From the context, which suggests that the gift had been Hesiod’s to keep, it can further be inferred that the talent bestowed upon him was lifelong. Indeed, not only does he report that the Muses later ordered him always (aiév) to sing of them first and last (lines 33-4), but his use of the present tense to rejoice in the abilitity that he had received from them implies that he had so far been able to draw on the gift any time he wanted: ‘the man is blessed’, he wrote, ‘whomever the

40 Il., 1. 70.

41 Ibid., 1. 70-71 and 2. 326-329.

42 As Eustathius records in, e.g., Commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem, I.15.12. See also West (n. 22), at 163-64, although his reference should be to the scholia to Aristophanes’ Clouds 1364, not 1367.
Muses love, for the speech flows (ῥέει) sweet from his mouth’ (lines 96-97). Likewise, in the Works and Days, as seen above, he expresses his gratitude to the Heliconian Muses for having ‘first (πρῶτον) set him upon the path of clear song.’ (line 659).

Do we now hold the answer to the question raised earlier, as to whether the song mentioned in line 12 should be understood generically or specifically? Can we now conclude that the ἀοιδή that Hesiod had received from the Muses was the art of song in general rather than the sole Theogony? Not as yet, for Hesiod records that there had been a third facet to the Muses’ teaching:

... and they breathed a divine voice into me (ἐνέπνευσαν δὲ μοι αὐδὴν θέσπιν), so that I might glorify what will be and what was before, and they commanded me to sing of the race of the blessed ones who always are, but always to sing of themselves first and last (lines 31-34)

In these lines, Hesiod relates the conferment of poetic talent, the breathing into him of a divine voice, to the subject matter of the Theogony. As the syntax of the sentence makes clear, the ‘divine voice’ (cf. αὐδὴν θέσπιν) was to enable Hesiod to ‘glorify what will be and what was before’ and to sing of the gods and the advent of the cosmos. The very same explanatory pattern recurs in the passage of the Works and Days quoted earlier, which contains a direct allusion to the proem to the Theogony alone. Hesiod describes how, little-travelled as he was, he had needed the Muses’ instruction to compose the ‘hymn of

43 In grammatical terms, ῥέει is a present of customary action. On this use of the present indicative, see W.W. Goodwin, A Greek Grammar (Basingstoke: Macmillan,1983), 1253.1, H.W. Smyth, Greek Grammar, revised by G.M. Messing (Cambridge Mass,1905), 108. 2, and Rijksbaron (n. 36), 5.3.
transcendent merit’ with which to celebrate Zeus’ control over wind and sea. In both cases, therefore, Hesiod’s acknowledgment of divine insufflation was restricted to circumstances in which lack of knowledge, either inherent or circumstantial, prevented him from treating of certain themes. In different circumstances, when his grasp of the topic was more secure, the Muses’ bestowal of poetic talent sufficed. As Hesiod dispenses advice about farming and extols the life of honest toil, he is very much his own poet, having, so it seems, been made self-sufficiently so by the Muses’ gift.

In Hesiod’s viewpoint, therefore, the function of the Muses’ afflatus in his life as a composer of songs is to enable him to sing of what he could not otherwise have known. Human knowledge, being spatially and temporally bound as well as inevitably reliant on the data of sense perception, is, by its very nature, limited. Hesiod’s use of Ἐσπίς (divine) to describe the afflatus confirms this. In early poetry, Ἐσπίς, like Ἐσπέσιος of which it is a rare and abbreviated form⁴⁴, is used to describe what is awe-inspiring or otherwise wondrous, including voices so enchanting, powerful or indeed prophetic that they cannot but be superhuman in origin. Such highly commendatory connotations made Ἐσπίς an epithet of choice for Homer and Hesiod to apply to poets and their recitations, singers and their songs and all those who, like the sirens and the nymph Calypso, have the ability to enchant others through the use of their voice. Thespis, together with its cognate verb Ἐσπίζειν, was also used to describe prophets, seers and all those who are able to recall a past they never knew and to foretell a future they would never see.

It can now be concluded that in the case of the proem, as well as in that of the individual song referred to in lines 658-662 of the Works and Days, the bestowal of poetic talent and the insufflation, while being individually necessary, are presented as jointly

⁴⁴ See Chantraine (n. 26), tome 2, at 432.
sufficient conditions to account for the composition of fine poetry on supernatural matters. This being so, the beautiful song (cf. καλὴν ... ἀοιδὴν) referred to in the programmatic line 22 of the proem cannot but be the *Theogony*, as opposed to the art of poetry in general. In order to ‘teach’ Hesiod to compose this particular poem, the Muses undertook the threefold task of setting him apart from the common of mortals, bestowing upon him the gift of song composition and breathing into him a voice that enabled him to sing of events normally inaccessible to human beings.

7. UNRESOLVED TENSIONS

For all of Hesiod’s artistry, the emphasis that he put on the divine nature of the afflatus that he had received from the Muses is the source of tension in the very narrative that it was designed to strengthen. Not only does the emphasis have implications that Hesiod, had he but been aware of them, might not have welcomed, but it sits oddly with the disclaimer that he put in the Muses’ mouth in lines 27-8. These points will now be taken in turn.

Sceptical readers of later ages, from Plato onwards, would point out that in acknowledging the Muses’ hand in the composition of the *Theogony* Hesiod had correspondingly lessened his own contribution. To the extent that archaic concepts of authorship differed significantly from later ones, the claim would be anachronistic. Indeed, far from feeling diminished by the phenomenon of divine insufflation, Hesiod took considerable pride in being a channel of the Muses. The afflatus, as he presents it in the
proem, elevated him to a super-human level of cognition, making him prophet and poet at the same time, thus conferring a divine seal of approval on the resulting composition(s).45

This said, the trope of the poet as beloved pupil of the Muses proved to have a dynamic of its own, of which no poet since Homer has been in full control.46 Homer’s repeated expressions of dependence upon the Muse, together with the imperatives (ἀειδε, ἔννεπε) which he uses to address them, may well have been a stylistic artifice on his part, but, even if they were, they yet carried highly ambiguous connotations, as testified by Phemius’ puzzling claim to be both self-taught and divinely inspired.47 In his own use of the trope, Hesiod, so sceptics of later ages would claim, could not avoid conceding more to the Muses’ afflatus than was compatible with his repeated expression of self-confidence as a composer of songs. As Socrates would point out in the Ion, divine afflatus disempowers the poet by relegating him to the status of, at best, an interpreter of the Muses and, at worst, a conduit for the divine voice.48 More generally, how philosophers and commentators would later read the

45 For a Homeric, less sophisticated, expression of the view that poets are granted supra-human knowledge, see, e.g., Odysseus’ promise to Demodocus that, if he can sing of episodes of the Trojan war that he never witnessed, he, Odysseus, would ‘proclaim to the world how generously the god has endowed you with the heavenly gift of song.’, Od. VIII. 498-99.

46 Alfred de Musset’s famous sequence of four poems, Les Nuits, composed between 1835 and 1837, in which the Muse figures as a central character, testifies to the longevity of this particular trope.

47 Od., XXII 347-8.

48 Ion, 534 e4-5.
autobiographical section of the proem, very much depended on the view they took of the genesis and power of the poetic voice. The construction that Plato’s Socrates, as well as Lucian, for example, were to put on Hesiod’s reliance on this particular trope, although not the only one possible, is far from being impossible or even outlandish.

To be sure, it is unlikely that Hesiod was aware that such a construction could be put on the proem. As he makes clear in both the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days*, and as the symbolism of the laurel staff in any case suggests, he believed that the Muses had bestowed upon him the talent required to be a composer of fine songs, capable of winning highly coveted prizes at competitions. What is more, as the text of the *Theogony* shows, he had no scruples in disregarding the Muses’ instructions when it suited the needs of his narrative. Lastly, the absence of any acknowledgment to the Muses in the *Works and Days* comparable to what we find in the *Theogony* confirms that he believed that the composition of the earlier epic, by virtue of its subject matter, had required a particularly high level of divine assistance. Yet, even in that case, he left his audience in no doubt at all that he was convinced of his authorship. In Hesiod’s outlook, the *Theogony*, although it had been made possible by the Muses’ multi-faceted intervention, was his own work. As we know, Socrates, in the *Ion* and elsewhere, was repeatedly made to express a very different view of the authorship of inspired poems.

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49 *Works and Days*, 654-657.

50 As noted by J.S. Clay, ‘What the Muses Sang: *Theogony* 1-115’, *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 29:4, 1988, 324. In his *Conversation with Hesiod*, 1, Lucian had already remarked that Hesiod never sings of the future (τά τ’ ἐσσόμενα, l. 32) in the *Theogony*.
The second source of tension in the Dichterweihe is the disclaimer that Hesiod included in the Muses’ address to the uncouth shepherd they were about to transform into a composer of songs. Although they would make him a fine poet, capable of composing all manner of songs, the Muses had taken care to warn him that he would never be assured of the truth of the compositions they were to breathe into him. To convey the unreliability of the divine word, Hesiod availed himself of the omniscient narrator’s privilege of putting words into the mouth of his characters: ‘we know how to say many false things, similar to genuine ones,’ he had the Muses tell Hesiod in his capacity as character in his own story, ‘but we know, when we wish, how to proclaim things that are true.’ These lines, in which the Muses boast of their capacity to tell ‘untruths’ so plausible that mortals could not detect them, are famous for a number of reasons. They attracted the censure of Xenophanes and Plato, both of whom criticised Hesiod for mendaciously ascribing shameful deeds to the gods. Furthermore, to the extent that Hesiod implied in those lines that his songs consisted of divinely inspired utterances rather than assertions whose truth was humanly evaluable, he promoted the very conception of the poet that Socrates was to criticise in the Ion: a hierophant who, in the throes

51 Lines 27-8, tr. Most, modified. According to Heath, ‘Hesiod’s Didactic Poetry’, CQ 35 (2), 1985, 258-59, the disclaimer that Hesiod puts in the Muses’ mouth shows him to be aware that the truth value of poetic utterances is not subject to the same constraints as other utterances. Although it may seem anachronistic to credit Hesiod with a distinction between fictional truth and truth tout court, the sophisticated manner in which Hesiod integrates the autobiographical episode of the Dichterweihe into the otherwise impersonal narrative of the proem, lends supports to Heath’s interpretation.

52 Xenophanes, DK 21 B 11 and 12; Plato, Rep. 2. 377 d4-e8.
of inspiration, is put out of his mind by the Muses and, as a consequence, intermittently loses
the use of his critical mental functions.\textsuperscript{53}

Admittedly, divine mendacity was not as distasteful a notion to Hesiod’s audience as
it later became - if Zeus could send ‘destructive’ ($\omega\lambda\omicron\varsigma$) dreams,\textsuperscript{54} why should Hesiod’s
Muses not lie? There is indeed no sign in the proem that Hesiod begrudged the Muses their
power to withhold the truth from mortals. But the main reason for his seeming indifference
in the matter is likely to have been that he placed the highest value, not indeed upon the truth
of the poetic word, but on its ability to please and comfort. As the Muses on Olympus
‘gladden the great mind of Zeus’ (I, 36), so do human poets, their attendants, soothe anguish
and relieve affliction in the hearts of mortals:

... that man is blessed, whomever the Muses love, for the speech flows sweet
from his mouth. Even if someone who has unhappiness in his newly anguished
spirit is parched in his heart with grieving, yet when a poet, attendant ($\zeta\epsilon\gamma\alpha\pi\omega\nu\nu$)
on the Muses, sings of the glorious deeds of old and the blessed gods who possess
Olympus, he forgets his sorrows at once and does not remember his anguish at
all; for quickly the gifts of the goddesses have turned it aside. (lines 96-104,
Most’s translation, slightly modified)\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ion}, 534 b5-6.

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Il.}, I2.6: what Homer called a destructive ($\omega\lambda\omicron\varsigma$) dream, Plato, referring to the same
passage in \textit{Rep.} 2. 383 a4, would call a ‘lying’ ($\psi\epsilon\delta\omicron\varsigma$) dream.

\textsuperscript{55} While Hesiod describes the poet as a $\zeta\epsilon\gamma\alpha\pi\omega\nu\nu$ of the Muses, Plato prefers to call him a
$\upsilon\pi\nu\eta\rho\acute{e}t\eta\varsigma$ (\textit{Ion}, 534 c8). The difference is significant; the two words, although semantically
close, are not synonymous since Hesiod’s epithet can denote an attendant to a shrine while
Plato’s almost unfailingly serves to describe a person employed in a menial capacity.
Read from a Platonic perspective, these lines sound an alarming note. If, as suggested, the primary function of composers of songs is to please or soothe, and if lies have the capacity to do just that, then truth cannot but become for them a secondary consideration. If ἄοιδοι are to be licensed to pass on half truths or even falsehoods in the process of fulfilling their therapeutic function, it is of no consequence since the plausible is sufficient for that purpose. If their recitations lull to sleep the critical faculties of those who listen to them, it matters little since the enjoyment of such fine songs as the Muses ‘taught’ them could not but be compromised by the exercise of rational thinking. In this respect Hesiod and the historical Parmenides stand at opposite points of the spectrum: while Hesiod’s Muses may lie, Parmenides’ goddess sternly points to ‘the way to truth’.

From Plato’s viewpoint, in which teaching is internally related to knowledge and truth, Hesiod’s own model of divine teaching could not but be unacceptable.56

7. TO CONCLUDE

A careful reading of the proem, it can now be concluded, reveals it to be a two-level narrative in which, under cover of a naively told life story, Hesiod has embedded his conception of how poets are made. Making explicit what tradition had left unsaid, he ascribes to the Muses’ teaching the talent to compose, the impulse to do so and whatever information, reliable or not, is needed to deal with certain themes, such as the birth of the cosmos and the genealogy of the gods. The Hesiodic bard, therefore, is someone whom the

56 See e.g. the link between teachability and knowledge at Meno 87 c and the parallel drawn between teaching and learning at Euthydemus 276 a3 sqq.
Muses have chosen and set apart from his peers to receive a gift so rare as to make him the equal of kings.

Hesiod’s conception of the poet and the poetic impulse turned out to be exceptionally long lasting, surviving in one form or another until the nineteenth century and beyond. Indeed, to this day, the Muse does maintain a presence, albeit a considerably reduced one, in the discourse of poets. In the centuries that followed the composition of the *Theogony*, Democritus took over the early conception of the poet as divinely inspired and, so it seems, introduced the concept of ‘poetic enthusiasm’ into the vocabulary of philosophy. As reported by Dio Chrysostom and Clement of Alexandria respectively, he held that: ‘Homer, having been gifted with a divine nature (φύσως λαξίων Ἴεαζοψης), built an ordered structure of manifold verse’ and ‘What a poet writes with enthusiasm (μετ’ ἐνθουσιασμοῦ) and divine inspiration is most beautiful.’ The evident approval with which the atomist wrote of poetic enthusiasm and inspiration led E.R. Dodds, in Delatte’s wake, to claim that it was Democritus who first formulated the concept of poetic inspiration: ‘... it is to Democritus, rather than to Plato, that we must assign the doubtful credit of having introduced into literary theory the conception of the poet as a man set apart from common humanity by an abnormal inner experience, and of poetry as a revelation apart from reason and above reason.’

Dodds’ claim is open to question. Although it cannot be denied that Democritus might have given currency to the vocabulary of enthusiasm and that Plato himself used it when


dealing with the composition of poetry, there is no compelling reason to assume that the older philosopher was the determinant influence upon the younger. For Plato’s dialogues, as we know, contain no references or explicit allusions to Democritus’ writings. More to the point even is the fact that, by the time Democritus turned his attention to the composition of poetry, the conception that Dodds assigns to him had been formulated some three centuries earlier by a poet whose compositions were frequently the object of public recitations. A much safer exegetical hypothesis, therefore, would take account of the close match that exists between, on the one hand, the view of poetry that Hesiod put forward in the proem to the Theogony and, on the other, the conception of poetry that Socrates took exception to in the Ion. So close indeed is the match, as I hope to have shown, that it is far more likely that, in the Ion, Plato reacted to the views of the early poet who, for the first time in his tradition, articulated the conception of poetry that Socrates criticises in the dialogue than to those of a philosopher whose physicalist views cannot have appealed to him. Nearer the mark than Dodds’ historical claim, at least as far as the Ion is concerned, is Most’s remark that ‘Plato was intensely concerned with Hesiod throughout his career.’

What Plato would describe in the Republic as ‘the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy’ may not quite have started at the time Hesiod wrote the proem to the Theogony, but it was in the making.

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59 Ion, 533 e4-5 and 536 B3; Phaedrus 241 e3-5 and 263 d1-2.

60 R. Ferwerda, ‘Democritus and Plato’, Mnemosyne vol. 25, 1972, 342-44, comes to the same conclusion by a different approach.

61 Most in Boys-Stones and Haubold edd. (n. 1), 54).

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