HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Hesiod (7th Cent. B.C.)

The epic poet as Muse possessed. The *Iliad* opens with '*menin aeide thea'*…'sing to me goddess of the wrath of….' while the *Odyssey* opens with '*andra moi ennepe, Mousa*…' 'of that man sing to me, O muse….' But that initiatory formula is not the only pattern available to the Greek epic poet, though it is a pattern reminiscent of a culture world in which individualism is sharply subordinated to the codes of the whole culture. The epic poet Hesiod (seventh century B.C.), creating in the same formulaic hexameter as Homer, speaks to us as an *individual* voice with no pretentions to channeling inspiration. It is not that he has no higher pretentions, for in fact he believes the Muses have given him the power to 'sing the story of things, the future and the past,' but he is quite clear that he, a Boeotian herdsman and narrator from a wretched farmland near the village of Ascra, *has been given his power by the Muses*. The Muses do not sing through Hesiod, but empower *him* to sing.

Import of Hesiod's epics. What remains to us, from that empowerment, is two small epics, The *Works and Days* and the *Theogony*. The *Theogony* describes the origins of the universe out of chaos, the gradual power take-over by the Olympian gods, the struggles that pit Uranus against Cronos, and fitfully usher in the current interrelated pantheon of the Olympian gods. As you read this poem, which may seem arid in the way (to many of us today) we find the genealogical lineages in the first books of the Old Testament, you may want to reflect on the fruitfulness of this work for the growth of the first Greek philosophy, which will employ, in its search for a first principle (a*rche*), the same kind of research thinking that generates Hesiod's *arche* of Chaos, his first principle, from which all else grew. But that fruitfulness is not the only cultural impact of Hesiod's work. He packs into this epic not only a mythography of the lineage of the gods, but he enriches his argument, that reason and justice on the whole, in the end, prevail, with a counter vision of the progressive decline of the state of mankind from an original Golden State to the condition of Bronze in which humanity currently finds itself.

Historical Context of Works and Days. Hesiod's *The Works and Days* narrates from his grudge against a brother who has dealt inequitably with him, and from there the small epic poem continues to discuss issues for the agricultural householder of the time: when to plant, when to plow, how to use the knowledge of the stars for sea travel, how to bend to the unavoidable dictates of fate. As these issues are discussed we are regularly reminded that the poem as a whole is an object lesson for brother Perses, who has defrauded Hesiod, and who has much to learn from hearing the following epic which accounts for the importance of thrift, honesty and hard work. The tenor of this poem is that of a Yankee farmer writing in formal hexameter lines, bowing his head—as do all farmers—to the fate the environment provides them, and writing with sustained fealty to the plans of the gods. We can hardly imagine a perspective less Homeric, less regally formulated. The binding perspective is captured in two sets of tales which seem to speak from Hesiod's heart. One is the tale that includes Prometheus and Pandora, and fixes on the fate of idle curiosity, as well as the fate of defying the Gods. Don't go there, man, he says. Then there is the thematic of the Five Ages, the tale of the gradual degeneration from gold to iron, which symbolizes the broken world Hesiod belongs to. The hexameter is the only force that binds Homer to Hesiod, part of a distinctive genre for seeing the world.

In the following, a hawk, about to consume a small bird, expresses his view of the role of kingship versus the little guy in Hesiod's society.

You fool, why do you scream? Someone much your better has you.
You go wherever I conduct you, songstress though you may be.
I shall make you my dinner, if I wish, or let you go.

Senseless is he who wishes to set himself against his betters:
he lacks victory and suffers grief upon grief.