CHAPTER THREE

HOMERIC HYMNS

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For the most part ancient Greek narrative texts are narrated in a mode that is called subsequent singulative narration: the narrator recounts once what happened once in the past.¹ Conversely, the corpus of Homeric hymns contains a disproportionately high percentage of simultaneous iterative narration: the narrator recounts what is happening repeatedly (or permanently).² The comparatively high proportion of this rather unusual narrative mode is most likely the result of the hymns' purpose and subject matter. Generally speaking, the hymns praise gods, who are immortal by definition, and they often do so by describing the gods' appearance, possessions, privileges, spheres of activity, etc. If the narrator chooses to recount how, for example, the god in question was born or received his or her special privileges, he will do so by means of subsequent singulative narration, because he is dealing with a unique event that happened in the past.³ If, however, he decides to narrate what the particular spheres of activity etc. are, he will resort to simultaneous iterative narration because gods are immortal and therefore possess and make use of their privileges for ever.⁴ Needless to say, a narrator can always choose to combine the two narrative modes, in that he recounts, for example, both that a god received his or her privileges and what those privileges are. Such a combination of the

¹ On subsequent singulative narration see Introduction (→).

² On simultaneous iterative narration see Genette [1972] 1980: 113–116 and *SAGN* 1:26.

³ Cf., for example, the shorter *Hymn to Aphrodite* (*hh.* 6), similarly *hh.* 26 (to Dionysus), the narrative section (D) of which consists of subsequent singulative narration only. For the principal five-part structure of the Homeric hymns see *SAGN* 1:35. Unless indicated otherwise, the arguments of this chapter all apply to the narrative section (D) of the hymns. All translations are taken from M.L. West's (2003) Loeb edition, occasionally with minimal adaptations.

⁴ Cf., for example, the shorter Hymns 9, 10, 11, 14, 21, 23, 24, 25. Such passages are of course not an exclusive prerogative of the Homeric hymns (→ Homer, → Hesiod, → Callimachus).

two modes can even be found in a very short hymn such as *hh.* 22 (to Poseidon), which has a narrative section of three lines only.

Unlike the shorter hymns listed in n. 4, most mid-sized and all longer hymns in fact contain either a mixture of the two modes or consist of subsequent singulative narration alone.⁵ The latter description applies to the *Hymns to Demeter* and *Hermes*, to *hh.* 6 (Aphrodite), 7 (Dionysus), 18 (Hermes), and 26 (Dionysus). The mixture of the two modes characterizes the *Hymn to Aphrodite*, *hh.* 19 (Pan) and in particular the *Hymn to Apollo*. The *Hymn to Aphrodite* and *hh.* 19 display a similar structure in that a first part in iterative narration is followed by the singulative narration of an ‘episode’. Strictly speaking, the structure of the *Hymn to Aphrodite* is slightly more complicated because the predominantly iterative narration at the beginning (2–44) is interspersed with short snippets of singulative narration (12–13, 22–30, 42–44).⁶ A case of particular interest is line 36: ‘She [Aphrodite] even led astray the mind of Zeus’, which could be part of either narrative mode.⁷ Only the sequel makes it clear that the passage is actually iterative: Aphrodite led Zeus astray ‘when(ever) she liked’ (*eut’ etheloi*, 38).⁸ Up to this point one might well have expected that the narrator was going to give an example of how Aphrodite made Zeus fall for one of his human lovers⁹—an account that would of course be in singulative narration. Conversely, the *Hymn to Apollo* is virtually unique in that its narrative repeatedly jumps back and forth between the two narrative modes. This switching between modes creates a rather unusual impression, which is further enhanced by the narrator’s similar tendency to switch back and forth between ‘third person narration’ and ‘second person narration’.¹⁰ The *Hymn to Apollo* really is a narrative text *sui generis*.

⁵ Exceptions are *hh.* 27 and 30. Their narrative sections consist of simultaneous iterative narration alone.

⁶ The analysis of 2–44 as predominantly iterative lends support to the view that the central narrative section begins in line 45 (de Jong 1989: 13 n. 2, with doxography).

⁷ Ruijgh 1971: 913.

⁸ Whether the iterative passage (36–39) is in fact simultaneous or subsequent is the subject of a scholarly debate that cannot be rehearsed here; cf. J.S. Clay 1989: 162–166, with literature, who argues in favor of the latter and discusses the disputed purpose of Aphrodite’s punishment by Zeus.

⁹ Janko 1982: 19.

¹⁰ Cf. *SAGN* 1:36, 40. To be exact, this is only true for the first ‘half’ of the *Hymn to Apollo* (down to line 282), whereas the second half does not use either simultaneous iterative narration or second-person narration. The boundary does not, however, coincide with that between the ‘Delian’ and the ‘Pythian’ part of the Hymn (*SAGN* 1:40).

Although both narrative modes allow for an identification of the temporal relationship between the recounted event and the act of narrating (cf. subsequent vs. simultaneous narration), simultaneous iterative narration lends the event a temporal vagueness or open-endedness that cannot be pinned down. Consequently, the temporal extent or time span of the relevant passages cannot be determined. They are, in a way, omnitemporal.

But after all, every mid-sized or longer Homeric hymn is at least partially narrated in the subsequent singulative mode, which does allow, at least in principle, for an approximate determination of the story's time span.¹¹ In all these hymns, the span tends to be short, which is not really surprising given the limited size of the hymns (the longest being the *Hymn to Hermes* with 580 lines). The hymn with the longest time span is the *Hymn to Demeter*, although temporal markers are rare and mostly vague. An exceptionally specific marker is found in line 47: 'for nine days' Demeter is searching for her daughter without either eating or washing herself, 'but on the tenth' she is approached by Hecate (the formula is of course Homeric: e.g. *Il.* 1.53–54). More typical is the vagueness of line 94: 'for a long time' (days?, weeks?, months?) Demeter traveled among men without being recognized until she met the daughters of Celeus. It is nevertheless possible to give a rough estimate of the time span because some parts of the story (narrated summarily) require time to develop their effect: the growing up of Celeus' son Demophon¹² and in particular the barrenness of the fields that forces the other gods into action.¹³ In the other hymns the story is a matter, probably, of days (*Hymn to Apollo*) or even hours (*Hymn to Aphrodite*, *hh.* 7). The *Hymn to Apollo* contains only one specific temporal marker (Leto is in labor for nine days and nights, 91), whereas the story of how Apollo founded the Delphic Oracle (214–544), in particular, is conspicuously vague in temporal terms. The *Hymn to Aphrodite* introduces its final part by means of the marker 'at the hour when herdsmen turn their cattle and fat sheep back to the steading' (168–169; cf. n. 21 below).

¹¹ Conversely, various factors make it very difficult or even impossible to determine the time span of the fabula: the openendedness of iterative narration and 'eternal' prolepsis (see below), the scarcity and vagueness of temporal markers.

¹² Cf. especially the frequentative verb forms *khriesk(e)* (237: [Demeter] would anoint [him]), *krupteske* (239: she would hide [him]), *teletheske* (241: [Demophon] grew and grew).

¹³ A rather vague indication of the duration is given in 305–306: 'the most dreadful and abominable year she [Demeter] made it for mankind across the nurturing earth'.

If the story's time span is noticeably vague in these cases, the temporal structure of the *Hymn to Hermes* is mapped out with much detail. The time-markers are in fact so frequent and specific that one is reminded of a minutely documented report. The summary that precedes the main narrative sets the tone:

Born in the morning, by midday he [sc. Hermes] was playing the lyre, and in the evening he stole the cattle of far-shooting Apollo—on the fourth of the month, the day the lady Maia bore him. (*h.Herm.* 17–19)

Not only does the narrator present a program of his narrative by anticipating two of its main elements,¹⁴ but he also sketches a specific time frame (morning, midday, evening) and gives a comparatively precise date for the events.¹⁵ The point is, of course, how much a newborn child of divine origin such as Hermes can achieve in a single day. (This traditional point will humorously be taken up when Hermes, still in his diapers, pleads not guilty to the charge of stealing Apollo's cattle because he was born 'only yesterday' and therefore incapable of such a deed.)¹⁶ But that is not all. The program also betrays a considerable interest in the exact chronology of the story. The implementation is accordingly specific. Right after formulating the program, the narrator starts out by saying 'Once he [sc. Hermes] had sprung from his mother's immortal legs, he did not stay long lying in his cradle, but ...' (*h.Herm.* 21–22) and continues by providing specific temporal markers at important way stations of his story:

The sun was dipping below the earth towards Ocean with his horses and chariot, when Hermes [sc. in search of the cattle] came running to Pieria's shadowed mountains. (68–70)

[Hermes is driving the cattle back to Cyllene:] His ally, the dark divine night, was coming to an end, the greater part, and soon it would be lightening and arousing people to work; the lady Moon had just reached

¹⁴ Inventing and playing the lyre (taken up in lines 24–64a), stealing Apollo's cattle (64b–153). The third principal element, the consequences of the theft (154ff.), is not expressly mentioned in the program.

¹⁵ Conversely, all the other hymns that narrate the birth of a god place it in an undetermined past. Held against this background, the concreteness of the *Hymn to Hermes* is all the more striking. To put it naively: how does the narrator know that Hermes was born on the fourth of the month?

¹⁶ Cf. *h.Herm.* 273, 376; yet another reference occurs when Apollo, discovering the hides of the slaughtered cows, wonders how a newborn infant could have the power to kill animals of such size (405–407). Finally, Apollo is amazed that Hermes, though small (*oligos*), can play the (newly invented) lyre so well (455–456).

her height, daughter of Megamedes' son, lord Pallas. Then it was that Zeus' brave son drove Phoibos Apollo's broad-browed cattle to the river Alpheios. (97–102)

and [Hermes] levelled the dark dust over them [sc. the embers] for the rest of the night, while the moon's fair light shone down upon him. In the early twilight he swiftly returned to Cyllene's noble peaks. (140–143)

When Dawn the early-born emerged from Ocean's deep waters to bring light to mortals, then Apollo came to Onchestus.¹⁷ (184–185)

This account has the taste of a modern police report and shows that the narrator of the *Hymn to Hermes* has a strong interest in questions of chronology. (The focus on the night hours is, of course, characteristic of the god Hermes.) A similar penchant for temporal specifics can be found in the actorial analepses that deal with the same events. Apollo, as he asks the old man about the whereabouts of his cattle, appears to know that they 'went off soon after sunset' (193). Similarly, he reports in his pleading to Zeus that Hermes came to steal the cattle 'in the evening' (341). Conversely, Hermes tells Zeus that Apollo came to charge him 'today, as the sun was just rising' (371). The temporal markers as such can mostly be paralleled with similar Homeric examples.¹⁸ What is different, though, is the dense distribution of temporal markers throughout the text. The *Hymn to Hermes* is narrated not merely in strictly chronological order, but rather with the exactness of a protocol, a phenomenon for which there seems to be no exact parallel in early Greek literature.

In fact, one might even say, without pressing the details too much, that the *Hymn to Hermes* displays almost a one-to-one correlation between narration and 'reality': the duration of the narration is not so very different from that of the events that are recounted (i.e. a 'scene'). In any case, this and the other Homeric hymns are characterized by a 'slow' narrative: a comparatively short time span is narrated in quite some detail. In this, as in many other respects, the hymns are heirs to the tradition of the Homeric epics (→ Homer). They share with them, among other things, a high proportion of direct speech, the 'scenic' quality of which almost automatically results in a 'slow' narrative.

¹⁷ Cf. also 'and the deathless immortals were assembling after gold-throned Dawn' (*h.Herm.* 326).

¹⁸ The only exception is *orthr(i)os* 'in the early twilight' (*h.Herm.* 98, 143), which does not occur in Homer, but cf. the semantically similar word *ēorios* (e.g. *Il.* 1.497).

It would, however, be mistaken to assume that the narratives of the Homeric hymns are equally ‘slow’ throughout. In reality, the narrator has several possibilities to vary the speed of his narrative, and a good example is a feature of the hymns that marks a clear departure from Homeric practice: the hymns make both more frequent and more prominent use of indirect speech. An example from the *Hymn to Demeter* will illustrate the point.¹⁹

[The conversation between Demeter, disguised as an old woman, and the daughters of Celeus has come to an end:] They [sc. the daughters] soon reached their father’s mansion, and quickly told their mother what they had seen and heard. She told them to go quickly and invite the woman to come, at an unstinting wage. (*h.Dem.* 171–173)

This conversation between mother and daughters constitutes an important step for the development of the plot, and it is quite likely that the Homeric narrator would have quoted at least one of the relevant speeches. Be that as it may, the hymn’s narrator does not, thereby accelerating his narrative noticeably. Only three verses suffice to relate a crucial element of the story, and this phenomenon is not unique.²⁰ In the quoted example, the variation of speed is particularly striking because the concise summary is followed by a fairly detailed (i.e. ‘slow’) description of the daughters (including a simile of three lines) on their way back to Demeter (*h.Dem.* 174–178). A similar descriptive slowing down can be found in the *Hymn to Aphrodite* 85–90, where Anchises takes in the various features, one by one, of the gorgeous young girl/Aphrodite (for such focalized descriptions → Homer).

To return to acceleration: in addition to the frequency of indirect speech, it is also worth emphasizing that—unlike the Homeric epics—the Homeric hymns may treat real cornerstones of the plot in indirect speech. Prominent examples include: Demeter swears that she will neither return to Olympus nor let the crops grow again before she gets to see her daughter again (*h.Dem.* 331–333); with Leto in ongoing labor, the other goddesses instruct Iris to fetch Eileithyia behind Hera’s back, lest Hera interfere (*h.Ap.* 102–106); Hermes and Apollo, finally recon-

¹⁹ Cf. in general Létoublon 1987: 132–135.

²⁰ Other instances of indirect speech are *h.Dem.* 202–204, 207–209, 294–298, 314–315, 327–333, 443–447; *h.Ap.* 102–106, 111–112, 510; *h.Herm.* 57–61, 391–394, 427–433, 522–523, 525–526, (probably) 569–573; *h.Aphr.* 26–28. It is hardly a coincidence that the hymn whose story is the longest, the *Hymn to Demeter*, has a high proportion of ‘time-saving’ indirect speech. However, the *Hymn to Hermes* shows that this is not the only reason for a high proportion of indirect speech.

ciled after the theft, take oaths to honor and not harm one another (*h.Herm.* 522–526). The Homeric narrator is likely to have resorted to direct speech in such cases. Overall, then, the hymns' narratives are comparatively 'slow', but at least some of them show more frequent and prominent variation of speed than the Homeric epics.

Given the comparatively short time span of the individual story, it is hardly surprising that there is virtually no instance of patent temporal ellipsis. The only example worth mentioning is the scene where Aphrodite and Anchises make love.

And then [sc. after undressing Aphrodite] Anchises by divine will and destiny lay with the immortal goddess, the mortal, not knowing the truth of it.—At the hour when herdsmen turn their cattle and fat sheep back to the steading from flowery pastures, then she poured a sweet, peaceful sleep upon Anchises ...
(*h.Aphr.* 166–171)²¹

Unlike the apparent parallel from *Madame Bovary* mentioned in the Introduction, the present ellipsis is probably due to a concern about decorum (cf. the similar ellipsis between *Iliad* 14.351 and 352). Needless to say, there are other cases of temporal ellipsis—no text is literally complete—but they are hardly remarkable.

It has been stated above that the *Hymn to Hermes* is exceptionally concrete by dating Hermes' birth to 'the fourth of the month'. In most other cases the narrated event is located in an undetermined, probably distant past (the *Hymn to Aphrodite* can be 'dated' by means of one of its main characters: Anchises). This impression that the events happened in the distant past is achieved first and above all by means of the ubiquitous verbal forms in the past tense.²² Secondly, the event is regularly said to have taken place 'at that time' (*tote*).²³ Thirdly, the narrator can indicate a difference between 'then' and 'now', for example:

²¹ The temporal marker 'at the hour when ...' nicely instrumentalizes a generic indication of time (Smith 1981: 61–62) in a concrete situation: Aphrodite of course needs to leave before Anchises' peers return from the fields.

²² Like the Homeric epics, the Homeric hymns do not make use of the historic present.

²³ Cf. *h.Dem.* 10, 97, 434, 451; *h.Ap.* 375, 388; *h.Herm.* 13, 73, 82, 233, 294, 513, 521; *h.Aphr.* 54; *hh.* 7.43, 26.8. Of these, *Hymn to Demeter* 451 is particularly noteworthy because the narrator makes an effort to explain that the standing epithet 'life-giving' (*phresbion*, of ploughland) did not apply 'then' (due to Demeter's ban), but 'in the past' (*to prin*).

[You, Apollo,] arrived at the site of Thebes, which was cloaked in vegetation, for *no* mortal *yet* dwelt in holy Thebes and there were *not yet* any paths or roads crossing the wheat-bearing Theban plain.

(*h.Ap.* 225–228)

Or he can refer to things of his own time in the present tense (e.g. the description of the horse ritual in Onchestus in honor of Poseidon, *h.Ap.* 231–236),²⁴ optionally underscoring the reference to the present by means of the adverb ‘now’ (*nun*).

Hence the place *is now called* Pytho, and the people *give* the god the title Pythios, because it was just there that the keen sun’s force rotted [gr. *puthein*] the monster [sc. Chimaera] away. (*h.Ap.* 372–374)²⁵

In accordance with the hymns’ principal subject matter, such references to the present mostly occur in connection with ritual practice and/or aetiological explanations.

As for the devices of analepsis and prolepsis, they do occur in the Homeric hymns, but not very often—at least not in the narrator-text.²⁶ In the speeches (in other words, as actorial analepses and prolepses) they are more frequent, whereas in the narrator-text they are rare and usually short. The most significant, but unparalleled, exception comes from the *Hymn to Apollo*, where the narrator gives a detailed account of how Hera decided to give birth to the monster Typhaon (*h.Ap.* 305–354). The uniqueness of this narratorial analepsis is further increased by the fact that it even contains speeches. The ‘stepping back in time’ of the analepsis is indicated here by the temporal adverb ‘once (upon a time)’ (*pote*, *h.Ap.* 305), which often marks the beginning of the narrative section in the odes of Pindar (→).

Most actorial analepses intend to bring the secondary narratee up-to-date, for example by informing him or her of an event at which he or she was not present. In the case of such internal analepsis, there often is an element of repetition (i.e. repeating analepsis), which allows the primary narratee to compare the two versions. In at least two cases the discrepancy is worth mentioning. When Persephone tells her mother how she came to eat a pomegranate seed before leaving the Underworld (which will force her to return there on a regular

²⁴ Cf. *h.Ap.* 385–386, 393–396.

²⁵ Cf. *h.Herm.* 125–126, 507–508, and index s.v. ‘references to narrator’s own time’ (also index to *SAGN* 1).

²⁶ Given that the hymns are comparatively short, the scarcity is perhaps less surprising than frequency would be.

basis), she claims that Hades ‘made me taste it with force against my will’ (*akousan de biēi me prosēnagkasse pasasthai*, *h.Dem.* 413). Conversely, the narrator’s version is dominated by the idea of Hades stealthily tricking Persephone into eating the seed (*h.Dem.* 371–374), apparently a source of embarrassment for her, which makes her resort to self-defence.²⁷ Secondly, Hermes’ plea of ‘not guilty’ to the charge of stealing Apollo’s cattle (*h.Herm.* *passim*) blatantly clashes with the narrator’s account of it. But, in fact, not even the secondary narratees are persuaded by his protestations.

Many Homeric hymns narrate, among other things, how the god in question received his or her particular privileges. Given the gods’ immortality, this account can lead to what perhaps may be called ‘eternal prolepsis’: the narrator or (more often) a character enumerates and describes the sphere(s) in which the god will be the master or mistress forever. For example:

[Hades to Persephone:] By being here [*sc.* in the Underworld], you will be mistress of everything that lives and moves, and have the greatest privileges among the immortals, while there will ever be punishment for those who act unrighteously and fail to propitiate your fury with sacrifices, in holy performance, making the due offerings.²⁸

(*h.Dem.* 364–369)

A similar device comes into play when the god explicitly instructs his or her worshippers (as in fact Hades indirectly does in the previous example).

[Apollo to his would-be priests from Crete:] I brought you here over the mighty main not with any ill intent, but you are to occupy my rich temple here, which is greatly honored by all men, and you shall be held in honor for all time. (*h.Ap.* 481–485; cf. 535–539, also 56–60)

Although the immediate (secondary) narratees of these instructions are of course mortal, the implication is that generation after generation will follow their example. As a result such prolepses are, at least in principle, ‘eternal’ too. A striking example is the passage in which Demeter predicts eternal strife among the Eleusinians (*h.Dem.* 263–266), which, however, is usually explained as reference to a ritual mock battle, the *ballētus*.²⁹

²⁷ N.J. Richardson 1974: ad loc.

²⁸ Cf. *h.Dem.* 398–403, 461–465; *h.Herm.* 283–288, 291–292, 458–462, 527–532, 541–549.

²⁹ Attested by Hesychius (s.v.); the connection was first made in the early nineteenth century by Creuzer (cf. N.J. Richardson 1974: ad loc.).

The ‘eternity’ of these prolepses results in connecting the distant past of the event with the present time of the narration and the future. The content of the various prophecies often has an immediate relevance for the primary narratees of the hymns, for example when current cult practice is given an aetiological foundation. The same applies *mutatis mutandis* to the passage in which Aphrodite prophesies that Anchises’ and her son Aeneas will rule over the Trojans, as will his children and his children’s children (*h.Aphr.* 196–197), which is likely to be *intended* as an ‘eternal’ prolepsis.

Finally, the factor ‘time’ plays an altogether different role in *hh.* 28, which recounts Athena’s birth from the head of Zeus. Her entrance into the world in full armor causes extraordinary and portentous natural phenomena: Mt Olympus trembles, the earth shakes, followed by a *tsunami* (*hh.* 28.9–12).

But suddenly the main was held in check, and Hyperion’s splendid son [i.e. Helius, the Sun] halted his swift-footed steeds for a long time, until the maiden, Pallas Athena, took off the goldlike armor from her immortal shoulders. (*hh.* 28.12–16)

In other words, time comes to a temporary and ominous halt until Athena takes off her armor.³⁰

To conclude: as a text corpus, the Homeric hymns are characterized by the juxtaposition of subsequent singulative narration with the much less common mode of simultaneous iterative narration (best illustrated by the first half of the *Hymn to Apollo*), probably due to the hymns’ subject matter. The passages in singulative narration show a similar preference, though on a much smaller scale than the Homeric epics, for a single (or perhaps a few) momentous event(s), leading to a story whose time span is comparatively short. This preference results in a generally ‘slow’ narration, which still manages to show more noticeable changes of speed than the Homeric epics. Overall, the hymns’ temporal structure is straightforward: narrated in roughly chronological order, there are few anachronies in the form of narratorial analepses or prolepses. With only one storyline in each case, the problem of dealing with simultaneous events does not arise. The chronological details of the narrative are mostly vague, except for the unparalleled specificity of the *Hymn to Hermes*.

³⁰ For the notion that time comes to a halt cf. *Od.* 23.241–246 and schol. *D Il.* 14.323 = Pherecydes 3 F 13c Jacoby (on Zeus and Alcmena). The notion of the sun standing still during battle is found in Joshua 10.13.