1 Introduction*

At least since the publication of de Jong’s seminal study on narrators and focalizers in Homeric epic on the one hand, and the first signs of interest in the *énonciation* of lyric texts on the other, narratological approaches to Ancient Greek literature have often highlighted the complex nature of narrative voices in a wide variety of genres. In this context the potential relevance of linguistic observations has been duly noted here or there, but so far we do not have anything that could be described as a ‘grammar of narrative voice’ in Ancient Greek. The present contribution cannot of course fill this gap. All it intends to do is, firstly, to draw attention to the gap, and thus to serve as a reminder not to forget both possibilities and constraints of the *signifiant* when we are trying to decode the *signifié*, and, secondly, to illustrate with one particular example that there is really something to be gained, even for those whose heartbeat does not normally quicken at the mention of the word ‘linguistics’.

The topic to be focused upon, the so-called ‘historical present’, is one that has been much debated in recent times by scholars interested in narrative ‘modes’ and the tense-aspect choices informing these modes. Quite naturally, therefore, much of what will be said below is indebted to other scholars. However, the relevance of these earlier studies to the history of narrative ‘voicing’ has not, it seems, been fully appreciated so far.

---

* The ideas set out in this paper have been developed during a period of research leave generously funded by the Leverhulme Trust through its Major Research Fellowship programme. For helpful comments on an earlier version I am most grateful to Niall Slater as well as an anonymous referee for this volume.

1 Cf., respectively, de Jong (1987) and Calame (1983).

2 See especially the contributions in Lalot, Rijksbaron, Jacquinod, and Buijs (2011) (especially Allan 2011, Basset 2011, George 2011, Lalot 2011, Lambert 2011, Rademaker and Buijs 2011). Other important literature on the historical present in Ancient Greek, to be discussed below, includes Eriksson (1943), von Fritz (1949), Koller (1951), and Sicking and Stork (1997).
Setting out from the observation that the historical present is virtually unknown to Homeric Greek, it will be argued that this curious absence is not to be explained as a purely stylistic phenomenon, but rather as linguistic in nature (Section 2): Homeric language could ‘afford’ to ignore the historical present, which presumably already existed at least during the later phases of oral poetry, because it possessed an alternative (older) grammatical tool that served the same narrative purpose (Sections 5–6). In order to demonstrate this equivalence, it will first be shown, with the help of a cognitive theoretical framework, that the historical present is as much tied to an ‘oral’ mode of presentation as its functional predecessor was (Sections 3–4). Moreover, it is this characteristic of the historical present which eventually turned it into a means of hinting at the oral voice of an author even when it was used in written texts belonging to much later, and profoundly literate, stages of Greek culture (Section 7).

2 Missing Historical Presents

Let us begin by formulating a straightforward but all the more pressing question regarding the attestation of the historical present. Scholars agree that no, or at any rate exceedingly few,3 historical presents are found in Homer. The first truly reliable examples are διδοῖ, ποιεῦσιν, γίγνεται, etc. in the fragments of Pherecydes of Syros, a fascinating but elusive writer of early cosmogonical prose (mid-6th cent. BC):4

(1) Ζάς μὲν καὶ Χρόνος ἦσαν ἀεὶ καὶ Χθονίη· Χθονίῃ δὲ ὄνομα ἐγένετο Γῆ, ἐπειδὴ αὐτῇ Ζάς γῆν γέρας διδοῖ.

PHEREKYD. SYR. 7Bl D.-K.

3 In Od. 7.104–107, with ἀλετρεύουσι, ὑφόωσι, στρωφῶσιν, ἀπολείβεται, “the present tenses […] are descriptive” (Hainsworth in Heubeck, West, and Hainsworth 1988: 328, following Chantraine 1953: 191), and Il. 9.237 ἀστράπτει may be similarly dismissed (pace Lilja 1968: 102); closer to the later historical present are ἐξοίχεται and ἀφικάνει in Il. 6.348 and 6.388 (cf. Koller 1951: 93).

4 Cf. Sicking and Stork (1997: 133): on the frequent historical present in Pherecydes and other early prose writers see Lilja (1968: 101–119). Note also the historical presents τίκτει and τίκτετον in the parodic theogonies at Ar. Av. 695 and Cratinus fr. 258, 259, which imply the use of similar forms in post-Hesiodic (‘Orphic vel sim.’) theogonies and thus jeopardize the view of Dunbar (1995: 437–438) that “Ars[istophanes]’s main model was clearly Hesiod; how far he may have known and used post-Hesiodic theogonies is very uncertain” (contrast Hes. Theog. 223, 346, 510 τίκτε).