

The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks

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and

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With Essays by

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men struggle to atone for the gains obtained by violence or deceit, the gains obtained by bad *eris*; on the other hand, he does not want them to acquire the wealth he concedes to them, these riches concealed in the earth that give them life (*bios*), without labor (*kai aergon eonta*),³⁶ without doing so through the good *eris*.

Once upon a time, however, during the Golden Age, things were different. The earth needed no plowing or sowing for the nourishing grains to sprout with such great bounty that neither destruction by war nor theft by stealth—no *eris* of any kind—had any place here below or in the heavens. People could live and eat without effort.³⁷ But from the moment Zeus found himself tricked by the wily Prometheus, the gods have hidden men's livelihood from them, burying it in the depths of the soil.³⁸ Since that time human existence is as we see it today: completely locked into a double struggle. Men are endlessly torn in two directions: mercilessly punished by the gods if they chose the bad *eris* in an attempt to avoid the harsh effort of labor, or shackled by the chain of painful toil if they chose the good one in hopes of peacefully enjoying honestly gotten riches.

*

The two versions of the Promethean fraud echo and illuminate one another—one, located in the *Theogony* within the framework of the divine epic having consequences that concern men only indirectly, and the other in *Works and Days*, directly inspired by Hesiod's own bitter experience of his quarrel with his brother. If men's lives, unlike those of the gods, cannot avoid *eris*, it is because the mortal condition finds its origin and *raison d'être* in the *eris* that pitted Prometheus against Zeus. Inversely, if Prometheus holds an equivocal position in divine society as the founder of a sacrificial rite whose ultimate consequence is to remove men from the gods and deliver them to Night's progeny, it is because the Titan's affinity with humanity is expressed first of all in the nocturnal *eris* that he stirs up in his rebellion against Zeus even in the luminous world of Olympus. Sacrifice itself, with its delicate equilibrium, is a response to this tension between two competing poles. As the central act of worship it links men with gods, but it does so by separating their respective shares. Men cannot take more than what they were given at the end of the trial in which the two rival divinities confronted each other. By conforming to the ritual order in the fleshly meal, which reflects and recalls this first *eris* between the two powers of the beyond, sacrifice—by the same right as its mythical founder Prometheus and with an ambiguity comparable in all points—takes on a mediating role between gods and men. It serves as an intermediary between the two races. But if sacrifice makes communication be-

tween them possible, it is by means of an allocation that sets them against each other. It unites them, not so they may be rejoined (as Prometheus wished, according to the *Theogony*; as was indeed the case in the Golden Age, according to *Works and Days*) but to confirm the necessary distance between them.

✓ START HERE ↘
2. Ox and Wheat ↙

The comparison of the two accounts is enlightening on yet another point. *Works and Days* does not repeat the first sequence, which the *Theogony* had broadly developed, of the cutting and sham distribution of the pieces of the sacrificial meat. It only mentions it as if it were a well-known fact, with an allusion to Zeus' anger "when Prometheus with his crooked schemes had duped him."³⁹ Then it immediately proceeds to the second episode of the myth, the theft of fire. Thus we may wonder if the version in *Works and Days*, with its account of the divine rivalry from which the current state of humanity is derived, has dropped the issue of food, which seemed so fundamental in the *Theogony*. As we said, sacrifice, the model for which was established by the Promethean deception, is capable of establishing and expressing the distance between gods and men because it involves completely opposite types of food for each party. Why does Hesiod not refer more explicitly in *Works and Days* to the allocation that by establishing the first sacrifice not only began the whole process of decline but continues, by its twofold nature as religious rite and way of eating, to symbolize the ambiguity of a human condition, a state that finds men connected with the gods by cult and separated from them by everything that their portion of sacrificial meat unfortunately represents?

In reality, the alimentary dimension of the Promethean myth is no less pronounced in *Works and Days* than in the *Theogony*. The theme of a food reserved for man and intimately connected to his specific form of existence is central to each of the two accounts. The theme has only changed its locus. And this shift, which can be explained if we consider the different perspective of each text, sheds light on some of the essential aspects of the myth in its relation to sacrifice. In *Works and Days* the products of the cultivated soil—Demeter's wheat, or grain food—occupy a position analogous to that of the sacrificed ox—pieces of meat, or fleshly food—in the *Theogony*. Indeed, for the author of the *Erga* (i.e., *Works and Days*)⁴⁰ man is considered in his capacity as farmer. Therefore he is viewed first of all as someone "who eats bread." For the author of the *Theogony* man, seen from the viewpoint of the divinity, is the one who eats the part of the sacrificial victim offered to the gods that is ritually reserved for him. But in both

cases human food bears the same stamp of the Promethean *eris*. Ever since Zeus hid away his food (*bios*), man can eat bread only if he has paid for it with his suffering, earned it with the sweat of his brow. Grain foods, which are accessible only by labor, remind us of the Titan's spirit of rivalry just as the sacrificial animal does. Furthermore, grain was not simply hidden during the conflict with the Olympian. The change of status that made food once freely available to all disappear beneath the earth is Zeus' reply to the Promethean ruse of concealing the edible portions of the animal under its hide to give them to men.⁴¹ The cultivation of grains is thus the counterpart of the sacrificial rite, its reverse. Thanks to Prometheus' deception, mortals henceforth have the flesh of the ox to eat; by Zeus' will the grain that they need in order to live no longer lies within easy reach.

Again, like the sacrificial victim, cereal food is eaten at the culmination of a regulated relation to the gods. The food creates a mode of pious communication between mortals and Immortals at the very moment that it underscores in that very communication the cleavage, distance, and disparity between the status of each side. For Hesiod the cultivation of wheat constitutes a truly cultic act that the peasant must perform for the divine powers.⁴² In his eyes work is a daily devotion; each task is assiduously executed at the proper moment out of respect for such sanctified acts. If the peasant, his storehouse full of grain, has enough bread to live comfortably, it is the result of harsh, regimented toil whose exact accomplishment had the ritual virtue of making the performer dear to the Blessed Ones, of making him dear (*philos*) to Demeter.⁴³ But this divine friendship and proximity, which eliminate want (*limos*), presuppose that the hard-working peasant has recognized and accepted the austere law of the fields⁴⁴ imposed by Zeus, a law that with the end of the Golden Age signals that gone are the days when men, ever youthful, lived without work or fatigue, feasting like gods. The significance of grain foods is that to avoid starvation, man, this sad child of *eris*, has no other choice but to devote himself entirely to painful effort, to *ponos*, the other child of *eris*.⁴⁵ To escape the misfortune engendered by *eris*, one must take the way of his brother.

There is one last similarity. We have maintained that in the logic of the myth, the comestible parts of the sacrificial victim go to men because these pieces of meat, already deprived of life and endowed with the capacity to satisfy an ever-recurrent hunger or to renew strength that would fail without food, constitute the diet of thoroughly mortal beings. Unlike the vitality of the gods, which is pure of all negative elements, theirs is precarious, unstable, fleeting, and doomed to death from the outset. The very

term *bios*, which Hesiod employs to indicate the ear of grain men use as their particular food, underscores a relationship between grains and the vitality peculiar to men, a relationship so intimate that we must speak of consubstantiality. The fabric of human life is cut from the same material that forms the food that sustains it. It is "because they do not eat bread" that the gods are not mortals. Not knowing wheat, fed on ambrosia, they have no blood.⁴⁶ Their *ikhōr* knows no declines or eclipses in power—those ups and downs that among men are like the stigmata of an ephemeral existence, the first taste of death that eating can only postpone. Let us recall the formula from the *Iliad* that describes human beings: "At one time they are in the fullness of their ardor, eating the fruit of the cultivated earth, at another lifeless, they are eaten away."⁴⁷ To go back to the terms of the *Odyssey*, barley and wheat constitute the *muelos andrōn*, men's marrow, the very substance of their life force.⁴⁸

These relationships and correspondences in the Promethean myth serve to establish a close connection between sacrifice and the cultivation of grain. They appear as two orders of phenomena that are both interrelated and equivalent. Their relationship is seen in the explicit textual references we have mentioned. It is perhaps even more evident in what the text does not say, in its silence. The abrupt and disconcerting allusion to Zeus hiding the *bios* in *Works and Days* would be a foreign, absurd, and incomprehensible element if the text did not presuppose, as part of the framing of the myth, the symmetrical position and complementary status of cereal *bios* and sacrificial victim. Since the sacrificial ritual has the same role in the context of eating meat that the cultivation of grains has in the eating of grains and vegetables, the sequence linking Prometheus' deceit with the need for men to work the fields to obtain the sustaining *bios* is amply justified by its mere presence in the text. Let us add that the ox slain and carved by Prometheus at the first sacrifice is the domestic animal closest to man, the animal best integrated into his sphere of existence, especially when it is harnessed to the plow to open the furrows of the earth. The ox is thus the very opposite of the wild animals that men hunt like enemies rather than sacrifice. In principle, domestic animals are sacrificed with their consent, as beings that can, by their proximity to men, if not represent them directly, at least serve as their delegates. The distance between wild animals and the human sphere is particularly marked in matters of eating. Wild animals eat one another, without any rule or restriction, without setting part of their prey aside for the divine powers. What they take is determined by no law but appetite. Indifferent to justice and piety, the animal meal does not reflect a higher divine order either in technique or

execution. It reflects the relationships of brute force in the war that the animals wage against one another for food.⁴⁹

What the ox is to wild animals, wheat is to wild plants. Of all the fruits of the earth, it is the most humanized. Wild plants grow by themselves wherever conditions permit. Wheat is harvested only after being cultivated over a year of careful attention comparable to the education given children to make them men.⁵⁰ At harvest time, human effort and divine good will echo one another in a balance of regular exchanges. Noncarnivorous animals find their food growing in uncultivated nature, in the wild grasses and plants that grow away from the fields and orchards worked by human hands, beyond the domestic horizon.⁵¹ Bread belongs only to man. It is a sign and guarantor of civilized life, separating humanity from the animals as well as from the gods. Eating cultivated domestic plants and sacrificed domestic animals are the features of a dietary regimen that serves to place the human race midway between animals and gods—beings both close and far from man—and establishes man in the intermediary status that determines the conditions of his particular existence.⁵²

3. Cook the Food, Burn the Dead

Perhaps it is now easier to understand all the implications of the bond in the myth that links the theft of fire to the division of the sacrificial victim on the one hand and to the hiding of grain beneath the earth on the other. According to the *Theogony*, it is because he never forgets the trick Prometheus played by rigging the portions so men got the edible share that Zeus decides from that day forward not to give men (*ouk edidou*, 1. 563) the flame of his celestial fire, the lightning ever-ready in the ash trees that they had enjoyed while they lived and celebrated with the gods. Why this response and what is its significance? Clearly, Zeus wants first of all to prevent men from using the gift they have received as the outcome of this first hand of the game. By depriving them of fire, he forbids them to cook the meat, which they cannot eat raw. Thus, Promethean fire is first of all associated with food; and the Titan's parry when he snatches the flame, hiding it inside a fennel stalk to bring it to men, is intended to give them all that is necessary for sacrificial cooking. But cooking meat before eating it also reinforces the contrast with the animals that feed on raw flesh. So the value of the cooking fire of Hesiod's Prometheus is already far-reaching. It represents culture as opposed to wildness. In this way it prepares the way for the theme of the "civilizing" fire, "master of all arts," that will be developed in Aeschylus' *Prometheus*.⁵³ But it does so in its own way, with all the complexities and ambiguities brought to the myth by the

intermediate status of humanity. Promethean fire is not the fire of the gods, the fire of heaven, the lightning that is all-powerful in the hands of Zeus and like its master, immortal. It is a perishable fire, created, hungry, and precarious, like all mortal creatures. To start it requires a seed of fire, kept beneath the ashes or carried in the hollow of a fennel stalk in the Promethean manner.⁵⁴ To keep it alive it must be fed. It dies when it is not nourished.⁵⁵ Fire's insatiable voracity, which makes it devour everything in its path, would liken it to a wild animal, as many formulas appearing as early as Homer suggest,⁵⁶ if, placed in man's hands to be mastered, it did not appear tame at the same time.

This civilized aspect, which provides a balance to the unleashing of a violent and bestial nature, is seen in the intelligent artifice and subtle invention embodied by the Promethean fire. It is not only the product of a ruse that, escaping Zeus' vigilance, enabled men to appropriate what the god had refused them. It involves a technique of transporting, conserving, and lighting the fire, part of the know-how inseparable from human life. But the *tekhmai* men use are no less equivocal than the Titan who granted them. Fire is a *dolos*, a misleading trick, a trap directed first at Zeus, who let himself be caught, but also effective against men should the occasion warrant—not only because the "ardor of the tireless fire" harbors a power beyond human control, but more precisely because this force carries something mysterious, a supernatural quality called Hephaestus that adds a new dimension to animal savagery and the acquired experience of human culture.⁵⁷ On three levels—animal, human, and divine—fire can play a mediating role at the heart of the sacrifice. Lighted on the altar and rising toward the gods to carry the fragrant smoke to them, it is not confined to tracing the path linking earth to heaven. It brings the work of distribution undertaken by Prometheus to its full completion in the cooking process by differentiating what is only roasted or boiled and belongs to men from what is completely consumed and sent to the beyond with the animal's very life. By eating what has not been burned but only cooked—that is, softened and weakened to enable the puny forces of the human body to assimilate it—mortals in some ways have what is left over from the sacrifice. Men eat the remains of a divine meal in which the essential is accessible only through total cremation, leading to the complete disappearance of the victim, devoured in the heat of the flames, from here below.

*

In this respect, the similarities and differences between sacrificial cooking and funeral cremation rites are illuminating. Walter Burkert believed he had found a virtual identity between the structure and function of the two

practices.⁵⁸ He insisted on the importance of the meal in funerals as well as in the sacrifice. But simply because funerals include a meal does not mean that it is of the same order as the sacrificial meal. For the funeral of Patrocles, Achilles offers a feast near the corpse of the dead man. Bulls, lambs, goats, and pigs are slaughtered, and this flesh is cooked "in the fire of Hephaestus," while the blood of the victims, collected in cups, is poured in libation all around the corpse.⁵⁹ In this case, then, the lives of the animals, whose edible parts will be eaten, are offered to the dead man. The sacrificial meal that opens the funeral establishes a kind of communion with him. Yet the fire lighted somewhat later on the pyre to burn the remains⁶⁰—and with them the animals and the Trojans offered as a holocaust—is not a cooking fire: the corpse is not eaten.⁶¹ The body is consumed by flames to open the doors of Hades to the *psukhē* of the dead man,⁶² to send him from the visible world, where his earthly remains linger as long as the body has not had its "share of fire," to the invisible realm of the beyond.⁶³ Here again fire plays a mediating role, making the body disappear from human sight (*ap' ophthalmōn*, l. 53), its flames devouring the flesh in the manner of a wild animal. The terms Homer uses to designate this fiery funeral feast are *nemomai*, *esthiō*, *daptō*.⁶⁴ Their connection with eating is strengthened by the relationship Achilles explicitly establishes between the glorious treatment given to Patrocles' remains, given to the flames, and the opposite, ignominious end the hero has in mind for the body of Hector, to be thrown to the dogs.⁶⁵ The opposition between honor and dishonor is not the only issue. To be devoured by fire means that the body is entirely consumed in its integral corporeal form, so that it moves as an intact whole into the realm of the beyond. On the other hand, to be devoured by dogs means, as the text clearly indicates, that the flesh is given to "be torn apart raw by the dogs" (*kusin ōma dasasthai*).⁶⁶ If Achilles had accomplished his plan, Hector's corpse, torn to pieces in its natural raw state, would be both dishonored in this world and forever deprived in the next of the invisible existence attained by cremation in the fire of the funeral pyre.

Something else must be kept in mind. The part of the human corpse that the flames devour without a trace is the same part of the animal victim that goes to men for their meal: the meat, including the tendons and internal organs, everything that is perishable and would rot after death.⁶⁷ But the funeral fire is not allowed to consume the body to the point that it cannot be distinguished from the ashes of the pyre. Wine is poured wherever the flames have reigned.⁶⁸ The remains of the dead man, that is, the bones, are then carefully gathered. Specifically these are the white

bones, *ostea leuka*,⁶⁹ which are clearly visible among the ashes (*tephrē*)⁷⁰ where they are easy to spot even if they have been charred.⁷¹ Covered with a double layer of fat,⁷² these bones are placed in a vial or small box wrapped with cloth and placed in a grave, the dead man's subterranean abode. In the funeral rite cremation totally consumes the body and sends into the invisible realm what would be the parts reserved in the sacrifice for man's meal; it makes the removal of these "white bones" possible. In the sacrifice these very bones, again covered with fat, constitute the gods' portion—the part that the *mageiros*, who has carved the animal so that the long bones are completely stripped, had set aside in advance to place on the altar to be burned. The two practices are indeed homologous, but since their purposes are different, they work in opposite directions. At the outset of the sacrifice, the incorruptible white bones are set aside and reserved for the gods, who receive them in the form of smoke. In funeral cremation, fire is used to burn the perishable flesh away from the white bones, cleaning them so that men may keep them as an earthly sign of the dead man in his tomb, evidence of his presence in the eyes of his kin. If the essential, the authentic living life of the animal is returned to the gods in the sacrifice with the calcinated bones, while men sustain themselves on the half-raw, half-cooked remains of the divine meal, the funeral uses fire to purify the body of all its corruptible parts, in which life and death are inextricably mixed, and to reduce the remains to the essential—the white bones, the intermediaries that connect living men with the deceased.

*

In *Works and Days*, the episode of the theft of fire is introduced in an allusive, abrupt, and apparently illogical way. "The gods," explains Hesiod to Perses, "have hidden their *bios* (i.e., wheat) from men. Otherwise you could live without doing anything, without working. But Zeus hid your *bios* when he found out that Prometheus had deceived him. From that day on he plotted woes for men; he hid fire from them." We would wonder what fire was doing in this story if we did not already know from the *Theogony* that Zeus' refusal to give fire is motivated by the Promethean trick concerning the parts of the sacrifice. Nonetheless the account still seems completely incoherent. Zeus' anger at being duped by the Titan is invoked to justify the need for agricultural labor. Furious at being taken in, Zeus hides life by burying the grain. His "hiding the fire" appears purely gratuitous in this context, with no discernible relationship with what has gone before it—unless for the archaic Greek hiding the *bios* and hiding the fire had such an intimate and obvious relationship that the one could not appear without the other.

First, let us note that the situation at the beginning is the same for both fire and grain. During the Golden Age before men and gods were separated, before the business at Mecone, barley and flames are both freely and directly accessible to man. They are available to him as "natural" gifts: he has no need to seek them, nor are they the subject of any worry or searching on his part. For the gods, "to hide" grain and fire means concretely that grain must first be buried, hidden in the ground in the form of seed to germinate and then ripen on the surface.⁷³ As a seed, fire must be buried and hidden in the ashes or a fennel stalk in order to rise and then blaze above the hearth. From a moral or metaphysical standpoint these two benefits, hitherto given naturally for man's free use, must henceforth be acquired, won, and paid for. They can be attained only by penetrating the layer of evils that surrounds them: painful effort, laborious activity, constant and assiduous attention. These difficulties, the requisite counterpart to advantages that were once freely and prodigally dispensed, make barley and fire triumphs of human civilization instead of the natural products they were in the beginning. That is not all. For the Greeks, grains and all cultivated plants in general are to wild plants as the cooked is to the raw.⁷⁴ The cooking that distinguishes them is based not only on the fact that the species that lend themselves to cultivation are those in which internal "cooking" is more complete than in wild plants, whose raw humors remain dominant, but also that men's hands, by opening and turning the soil so that the sun penetrates it, contribute to a better, more developed "cooking" of domesticated plants. To these two cooking types, the first spontaneous and the second through agriculture, is then added a third to complete the process. In transforming flour into bread and cakes, the cooking done in the kitchen makes grains fully edible. It severs their last bond to the domain of nature and rawness in which flour is a hybrid, a half-formed thing neither raw nor cooked, wild nor civilized. Taken from the oven, bread has become something else. Henceforth it is *sitos*, human food, in the same way that a piece of raw and bloody meat is transformed into a civilized dish once it is roasted or boiled.⁷⁵

Now, the earth spontaneously offered to men of the Golden Age fruits and grains that in their natural state possessed all the traits and qualities of cultivated plants. These products grew already cooked, as if the soil had been worked and turned by the plow without human labor. Furthermore, they were immediately edible without having to be transformed and humanized by the action of the cooking fire. The Golden Age does not reflect the opposition between a state of nature and civilization; it abolishes any difference between them. It presents civilized food as the spontaneous

products of nature that man, without having to do anything, would find already cultivated, harvested, stored, and cooked—ready to eat. In this respect, the harvests of grain the earth brought forth in the Golden Age are like these harvests of meat the fortunate Ethiopians found near the Sun's Table, according to Herodotus. Every morning, the meats were there, scattered about the plain that brought them forth from itself in the night, all carved, divided, and already boiled, so the diners merely had to sit down to eat. They are produced in a naturally cooked state.⁷⁶

*

Thus the end of the Golden Age signals the need for sacrificial fire to cook meat, agricultural labor to cook grains, and the cooking fire to make the grains edible. With one stroke, the angry Zeus hides fire and wheat to make men atone for the meat they received by the grace of Prometheus. If things had stayed this way at Mecone, men would not have been able to eat any more of the fruit of domesticated plants, for it would be raw, just as in the version of the *Theogony* they would not be able to eat the raw meat of domesticated animals.

Promethean trickery not only sets up the rules for sharing the victim once and for all. With the same harshness it brings an equally ineluctable consequence in its wake, the need for work, *ponos*. To eat human food men must devote themselves from that day forward to the cultivation of grains as well as sacrificial cooking.

— STOP HERE — 4. The Titan of Hesiod, the Titans of Orpheus

Before considering the final sequence of the tale, Zeus' creation of the "beautiful evil" that will seal mortals' fate by changing them from the state of *anthrōpoi*, which they had occupied alone up to that point, to that of *andres*,⁷⁷ male men faced with female women, the necessary complement to males but also their negation, double, and opposite,⁷⁸ we must go back over some textual details to confirm and refine our analysis.

We have seen that the *eris* between Prometheus and Zeus takes place at Mecone. Why there? Hesiod sheds no light on this point, but accounts and allusions found elsewhere lead to three comments.

1. *Mecone* is an ancient name for Sicyon.⁷⁹ It is there, recalls Callimachus among others, that the gods had established their seat at the end of the war against the Giants (*hedranon*) when they divided up the honors (*timai*) among themselves using a lottery.⁸⁰ An earthly site and abode of the gods, Mecone can represent that place where men and divinities still living side by side used to be seated at the same tables, feasting together at banquets and eating identical food.