CHAPTER FOUR

A GOD

WHY IS HERMES HUNGRY?

Ἀλλὰ ξύνοικον, πρὸς θεῶν, δέξασθέ με.
(But by the gods, accept me as house-mate)
Ar. Plut 1147

1. Hungry Hermes and Greedy Interpreters

In the evening of the first day of his life baby Hermes felt hungry, or, more precisely, as the Homeric Hymn to Hermes in which the god’s earliest exploits are recorded, says, “he was hankering after flesh” (κρειῶν ἑρατίζων, 64). This expression reveals only the first of a long series of riddles that will haunt the interpreter on his slippery journey through the hymn. After all, craving for flesh carries overtly negative connotations. In the Homeric idiom, for instance, the expression is exclusively used as a predicate of unpleasant lions. Nor does it

1 This chapter had been completed and was in the course of preparation for the press when I first set eyes on the important and innovative study of the Hymn to Hermes by D. Jaillard, Configurations d’Hermès. Une “théogonie hermaïque” (Kernos Suppl. 17, Liège 2007). Despite many points of agreement, both the objectives and the results of my study widely diverge from those of Jaillard. The basic difference between our views on the sacrificial scene in the Hymn (which regards only a section of my present chapter on Hermes) is that in the view of Jaillard Hermes is a god “who sacrifices as a god” (“un dieu qui sacrifie en tant que dieu,” p. 161; “Le dieu n’est donc, à aucun moment de l’Hymne, réellement assimilable à un sacrificateur humain,” p. 125), while I regard “the actor Hermes as pictured in a fully human perspective throughout the scene” (below p. 322). Differences between our interpretations of related scenes from other literary sources are all affected by this primary controversy. In the present circumstances the best course of action seemed to me to retain my main text unchanged, while reserving my responses to his treatment to the footnotes. I have severely restricted myself to themes immediately relevant to the gist of my theory, especially to Jaillard’s Ch. II: ‘Configurations hermaïques du sacrifice’.

2 On the palette of different connotations the expression may have had, see: Haft 1996, 38 f.

3 The negative association returns when the expression is used a second time in the hymn, namely in v. 287, where Apollo prophesies Hermes’ future life as a brigand “robbing lonely herdsmen in mountain glades, coming on their herds, hankering after flesh.” To project the lion’s carnal appetite onto the heroes Aias (Il. 11.551) and Menelaos (Il. 17.660), who are compared with the hungry lion (so: Haft 1996, 48
particularly suit the context in the Homeric hymn. In both characters assigned to him, that of an infant and that of a god, Hermes should have been the very last person to fancy a meaty dish. Babies, even divine babies, are hankering after milk, as Hermes himself, once it suits his purpose later in the hymn, helpfully reminds both his vindictive brother Apollo and the amused reader (267). Nor should, in a mythological context, a god betray an interest in the consumption of flesh unless served in the culinary speciality of knise (steam rising from the burnt mēria wrapped in fat).

Not by nature worried about negative connotations, hungry baby Hermes sets out and manages to steal the cattle of his brother Apollo. After having kindled a fire in a bothros (hearth pit) he kills two of the immortal cows—both physically and linguistically a rare tour de force. He slaughters them by flinging them on their backs and piercing their spinal cords. Next, he chops them up, prepares the meat, roasts it, and divides it into twelve equal portions distributed by lot, making each portion an honorary offering for each of the twelve gods. After thus having dished up the cows, the infant feels he could eat a horse. “Even though he is a god” (καὶ ἀθάνατόν περ ἐόντα), he is literally tormented by the sweet savour (ὀδμή) of the roasted meat (note: not by the knise of burnt meat: there was no knise, for there was no burnt meat). Yet,