

CHAPTER I

Human sacrifice, ancient and modern

Nine dogs had their master that fed beneath his table, and of these did Achilles cut the throats of two, and cast them on the pyre. And twelve noble sons of the great-hearted Trojans he slaughtered with the bronze – and grim was the work he devised in his mind – and to it he set the iron might of fire, so that it would spread. Then he uttered a groan, and called on his dear comrade by name: ‘Hail, Patroclus, even in the house of Hades, for now I am bringing to fulfillment all that I promised you before. Twelve noble sons of the great-hearted Trojans, all these together with you the flame devours; but Hector, son of Priam, I will not give to the fire to feed on, but to dogs.’
 (Homer, *Iliad*)

[E]very day we saw sacrificed before us three, four or five Indians whose hearts were offered to the idols and their blood plastered on the walls, and the feet, arms and legs of the victims were cut off and eaten, just as in our country we eat beef brought from the butchers. I even believe that they sell it by retail in the *tiangués* as they call their markets. Cortés told them that if they gave up these evil deeds and no longer practised them, not only would we be their friends, but we would make them lords over other provinces. All the caciques, priests, and chiefs replied that it did not seem to them good to give up their idols and sacrifices and that these gods of theirs gave them health and good harvests and everything of which they had need.
 (Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*)

THE SACRIFICE OF THE PEERAGE
 DEATH OF 45 HEIRS IN THE WAR
 (*The Times*, 15 February 1916, p. 8)

Therefore it became the practice to cut out the tongues of the girls three months before they were due to be sacrificed. This was not a mutilation, said the priests, but an improvement – what could be more fitting for the servants of the Goddess of Silence?
 Thus, tongueless, and swollen with words she could never again pronounce, each girl would be led in procession to the sound of solemn music, wrapped in veils and garlanded with flowers, up the winding steps to the city’s ninth door. Nowadays you might say she looked like a pampered society bride.
 (Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*)¹

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Derek Hughes

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Human sacrifice has preoccupied writers since the beginnings of Western literature. It occurs in the *Iliad*, and pervades the work of Euripides and Virgil. It is present in the Renaissance: for example, a human sacrifice initiates the chain of calamities in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. By contrast, the optimistic rationalism of the Enlightenment expressed itself in numerous plays and libretti in which civilization frees itself from the superstitious barbarism of human sacrifice: Mozart's *Idomeneo* and Gluck's two *Iphigénie* operas are well-known examples, but they are survivors from a very large field of lesser but cognate works. Self-immolation, whether as an instrument of national destiny or erotic consummation, fascinated the nineteenth century, most notably in the works of Wagner. Then there is Modernist human sacrifice. On 29 May 1913, a diverse audience gathered in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées to hear – or rather drown out – one of the two seminal works of twentieth-century music, Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. It portrays a human sacrifice.

Human sacrifice is everywhere in Modernist texts: in Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *The Cocktail Party*, in Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, in Lawrence's 'The Woman Who Rode Away' and *The Plumed Serpent*, and in Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*. Many analysts of modern society begin with speculation about its sacrificial origins: Adorno, Baudrillard, and Girard, for example. Only in the late twentieth century does the theme seem slightly in retreat, perhaps because it feels inadequate to the monstrous horrors which the mid-century witnessed.

By human sacrifice I mean, primarily, the literal, ritual, religious sacrifice of a human victim. To concentrate exclusively on the literal event, however, would be too restrictive. When, in the eighteenth century, Voltaire and others write plays about human sacrifice in ancient or exotic places, they are not primarily writing about the laws of ancient Crete but about the intolerance of contemporary France. A writer may approach things the other way round, portraying a contemporary society, but seeing in its advanced and elaborate structures atavistic processes that recapitulate those of human sacrifice. My subject, therefore, is literary works in which ritual human sacrifice is performed, or narrowly averted, or used as a powerful and deliberate symbol. I am often asked questions such as 'Is judicial execution a human sacrifice?' Such enquiries are, I think, mistaken. The point is not the thing itself but its representation. In the modern world, executions rarely approximate to human sacrifices, but it is perfectly possible for a writer to use the idea of human sacrifice powerfully to interpret the social or psychological dynamics of an execution, as Dickens does in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Not every guillotining, however, is a human sacrifice. Do vampires conduct human sacrifices? Not necessarily, but (in literature) sometimes. Is Clarissa Harlowe a human sacrifice? No. Richardson's novel is full of the language of material, sexual, and moral sacrifice. It explores its spectrum of possibilities, from the trivial and

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cynical to the essential. In examining the cynical and the trivial, it scrutinizes the ethos of the century in which it first became possible to talk of making financial sacrifices, but it also explores the kinds of personal renunciation which are morally imperative. Nowhere, however (even in portraying the death of the heroine), does it evoke ritual human sacrifice, as Voltaire at times does in his analyses of contemporary France.

In this study, I examine transformations in the literary interpretation of human sacrifice, from Homer to the present day. For my purpose, literature includes music theatre: it would be perverse to study transformations of Euripides without considering his impact on opera, from the eighteenth century onwards; it would be equally perverse to ignore Wagner, whose influence on literature (on, for example, Thomas Mann) is almost as great as his influence on music. If literature and music theatre are deeply interdependent, however, painting raises quite different issues and modes of moral interpretation, and participates in quite different traditions. Timanthes' famous lost painting of the sacrifice of Iphigenia captured Calchas, Odysseus, and Menelaus in various expressions of grief, and registered the still greater grief of Agamemnon by covering his face with a robe.² One challenge facing the later painter of the scene was whether he could outdo Timanthes by uncovering Agamemnon's face, or whether he should follow his venerable example, as do the anonymous mural at Pompeii and Tiepolo's fresco at the Villa Valmarana, Vicenza (Plates 1 and 2). This is a tradition, and a technical problem, that has no counterpart in literature and music theatre. Moreover, the Timanthes painting freezes in a single, eternal moment of virtuous grief characters who, in the dramatic tradition, are seen dynamically – and, moreover, in a state of dynamic villainy. Whereas the literary and musico-dramatic traditions are inseparable, the visual arts address different issues and questions, which will not be explored here.

This is a wide-ranging work, but it is not an encyclopaedia. Its subject is evolving traditions, and processes of cultural transformation, and it concentrates on major turning points. It deals with minor works when they are culturally revealing, but it avoids the anomalous, concentrating on texts which enter and influence a substantial tradition. Thus, although many of Euripides' plays deal with human sacrifice, I consider those which have exercised the clearest influence on later literature: *The Bacchae*, in which a mother deludedly sacrifices her son, and *Iphigenia among the Taurians* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*, in which human sacrifice is averted. Indeed, one test of the literary status of human sacrifice in a period is whether librettists and dramatists are more interested in adapting the Iphigenia plays, as they were in the eighteenth century, or *The Bacchae*, as they were in the twentieth. In that century, its influence was evident not only in overt adaptations such as those of Wole Soyinka and of Hans Werner Henze, but also in Thomas Mann's three great engagements with the Dionysiac, *Death in Venice*, *The Magic Mountain*, and *Doctor Faustus*.

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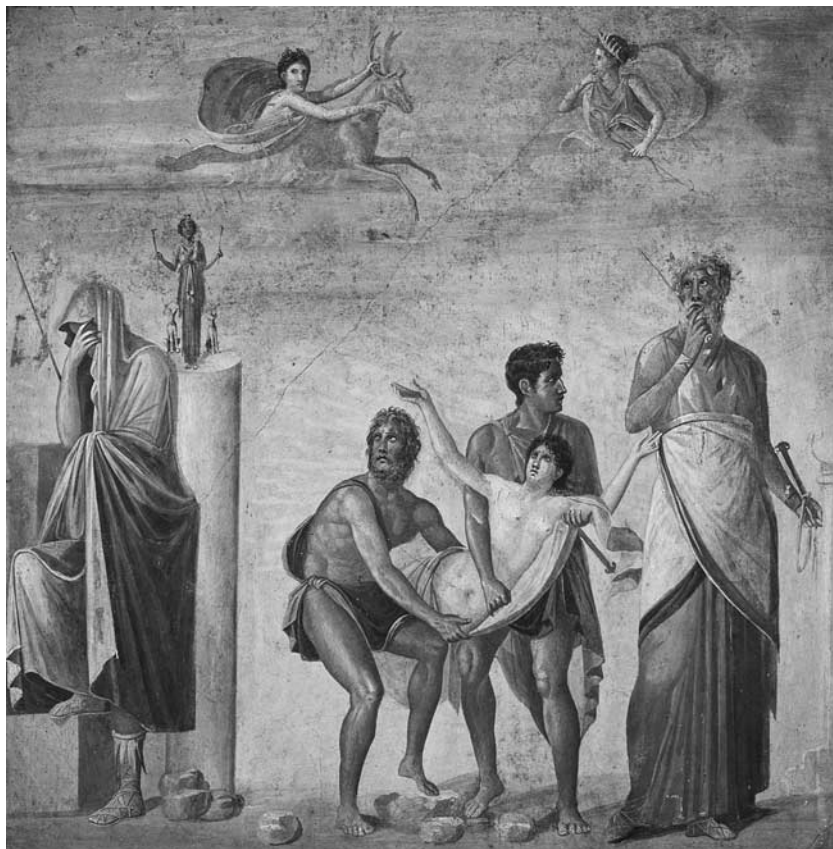
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Plate 1 The sacrifice of Iphigenia, perhaps after the lost painting of Timanthes
(House of the Tragic Poet, Pompeii)

As the traditions develop, other streams enter the current. Sometimes these may be narratives which are not sacrificial in themselves, but inspire sacrificial narratives in others. An example is Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's novella *Undine*, of 1811, about a knight who is torn between a mortal woman and the water sprite who is at once her opposite and her double. On the night of his wedding to the mortal, he accepts a kiss from her rival, even though he knows that the price of the kiss is death. Though the death is not in itself sacrificial, it palpably influences later erotic self-immolations, in Wagner, Mann, and indeed in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*.

This is also, of necessity, a book in which subordinate themes, at first seemingly separate from the main one, gradually gain prominence and become integrated with it. Chief among these is the relationship between sacrifice and systems of calculation or measurement. Initially, sacrifice is not a quantified transaction: a surrender of something to the gods in the

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Plate 2 Giambattista Tiepolo, *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia* (1757) (Villa Valmarana, Vicenza)

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hope of corresponding reward. Once it is so regarded, however, it becomes possible to see profound psychological or symbolic affinities between the quid pro quo of the sacrificial transaction and the equivalences established in systems of measurement, or in mathematical calculation, or in the determination of exchange value in the marketplace. The iniquities of capitalism, for example, may be imagined to be sacrificial in nature.

Counting in Greek tragedy is associated with the quest for ordered culture, often in opposition to the chaos of human sacrifice (as in the *Oresteia*). In Virgil, however, sacrifice has a positive mathematical dynamic and rationale, in that the one must be sacrificed for the many, and from Shakespeare onwards writers start to see an intrinsic sacrificial principle in the systems of exchange that sustain advanced European societies. At the same time, mathematical systems become key markers of cultural difference: when seventeenth-century writers such as Dryden and Aphra Behn describe the ritualized violence of American cultures, they associate its outlandish nature with alien approaches to mathematics; but they also show that the more advanced numerical and economic systems of the European colonists produce their own corresponding rituals of violence. Human sacrifice and counting are, as it were, the first and second subjects of this book. At first, in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, they are opposed, in that counting pre-eminently symbolizes the ordering cultural intelligence that is abolished in the act of human sacrifice. This opposition never disappears: it is present, for example, in *Robinson Crusoe*. More often, however, man in later texts is a sacrificer *because* he is a measurer and enumerator; the primitive compulsion to sacrificial violence is simply reformulated by his most advanced systems of numerical abstraction. The use of counting in Greek tragedy is therefore analysed not because it is, in itself, sacrificial, but because it presents a constellation of ideas – the relationship between man's capacity for numerical order and moral chaos – which was later to explain his capacity for human sacrifice.

Literary human sacrifice rarely has much connection with the real thing. The wealth of ethnographic information recorded by early witnesses of Mexico and Peru proved too alien to be assimilated into the literary mainstream. Though Aztec human sacrifice continues to fascinate, it fascinates as the focus of very Western fantasies, such as those of D. H. Lawrence. As Britain and other colonial powers sought to eradicate *sati* and other sacrificial practices, Wagner concluded *The Ring* with a transfiguring widow-burning, though one with very little reference to reality. Only at one point has there been any substantial interaction between literature and anthropology: in the influence of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (first edition 1890).

Frazer argued that all primitive cultures are shaped by two fundamental but erroneous innate ideas: that one can cause events by imitating them (for example, sticking pins in an image), or that something that has been

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in contact with a person – a garment, a hair, even a name – gives power over the person himself. From these principles, he explained the sacrifices that mimetically guarantee the rebirth of the year by casting aside exhausted life. The rites of renewal preserved in the flaying rituals of the Aztecs, the Crucifixion, and the dismemberment of Pentheus in *The Bacchae* all originate in the same innate but mistaken theories of causation: theories that are part of us, because they were part of our own childhood view of the world. Not only did Frazer establish an apparent link between the cult of Huitzilopochtli and the Crucifixion: he established a link whose living force could be felt within the mind of each of his readers, so that his excavation of cultural layers was also a journey down through the layers of the mind to earliest childhood. Suddenly, the multiform cultures of the past and present, in all their outlandish violence, were derived from a single root that we can still feel stirring within us. No wonder he was so influential on the arts. But no other anthropologist has been, and his grand synthesis has long since disintegrated.

Thus, with only passing and opportunistic reference to ethnography, human sacrifice has been a major literary theme throughout the classical period, and ever since the Renaissance. The literary version developed an anthropology of its own, expressing the conflicts, conditions, and self-image of the age in which it was produced: it reflects, for example, changing views of the significance of the body, of individual rights and consciousness, and of the systems of exchange which determine the social value of an individual; of the relationship between the home culture and alien times or nations. The literary concept of the sacrificial transaction thus changes and develops under its own dynamics: one does not look to ancient Greece to describe the difference between Racine's *Iphigénie en Aulide* and Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*. Although theoretical accounts of human sacrifice rarely interact with literature, however, they can possess their own status as culturally revealing fictions. The idea of human sacrifice is a fundamental starting point in Adorno and Horkheimer's still current *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, though its assumptions about the origins of sacrifice are now mere curiosities.

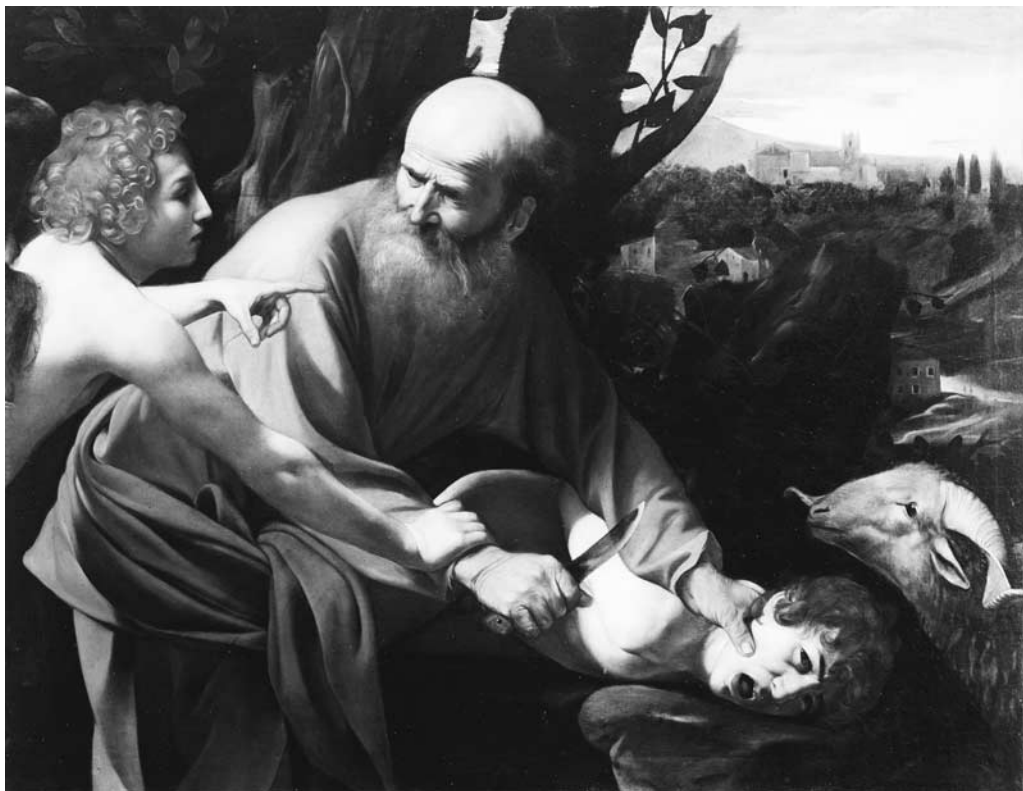
But what of the Crucifixion in literature? Clearly, a single chapter on the role of Christ in Western literature would be an absurdity, but there are other grounds for treating the Crucifixion as a separate case, largely outside this study; for, until the eighteenth century, it is imagined, represented, and classified quite differently from all other kinds of sacrifice. Not until that century, in works such as Volney's *Les Ruines*, do the Aztec and Christian religions start to seem morally equivalent; not until the age of Frazer do Aztec and Christian sacrifice start to seem identical in their cultural and psychological origins. Similar points can be made about the story of Abraham and Isaac. For much of the Christian era, this was safely unproblematic, since its historical function was to foreshadow God's willingness to

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[More information](#)Plate 3 Caravaggio, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1603)

sacrifice his son. It becomes problematic when secularized: in, for example, Caravaggio's *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (Plate 3), which emphasizes Isaac's terror and Abraham's reluctance to desist, or in Hobbes's and Spinoza's critiques of the verifiability of divine revelation. Voltaire mocks the absurdity of the Abraham and Isaac story, as does the English deist Thomas Chubb.³ I shall discuss it here insofar as it is treated as a problematic secular narrative.

THE ORIGINS OF SACRIFICE: THEORIES AND MYTHS

The worshipper experiences the god most powerfully not just in pious conduct or in prayer, song, and dance, but in the deadly blow of the axe, the gush of blood and the burning of thigh-pieces.⁴

In his detailed sociobiological account of the origins of sacrificial practice, *Homo Necans*, Walter Burkert locates the origins of sacrificial ritual in the Palaeolithic rituals of the hunt.⁵ Hunting brings the invention of culture, group co-operation, and the division of sexual roles. Man acquires artificially the practices that are instinctive to the great beasts of prey, redirecting

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intraspecific aggression towards animals of another species (p. 20). The rituals of the hunt involve killing, the expiation of guilt for the death of the animal, and the reassembly of its bones in a kind of resurrection, to ensure the continuity of life. An example of the continuing association of sacrifice and guilt for slaying is provided in the annual Athenian ritual of the Bouphonia (slaying of the ox), after which there was a trial for the murder of the ox. The axe and knife were found guilty and cast into the sea.

In Burkert's account, the development of agriculture perpetuated the ritual need to guarantee the emergence of life out of death. The mentality and symbolism of the hunt shape the rituals sustaining the death and rebirth of the grain, which was guaranteed by blood sacrifice. The hunt became unnecessary, though its primordial importance survives in its persistence as an élite activity. The *Männerbund* of the hunt reconstitutes itself in secret societies, in which the initiand takes the place of the prey and is symbolically killed, through a surrogate animal. Yet, with the decline of the hunt, aggression is no longer safely directed towards another species. If the harvest blood sacrifice in Greece was always (as far as we can see) animal, in other parts of the world it was human. 'Civilized life endures only by giving a ritual form to the brute force that still lurks in men' (p. 45); 'Only *homo necans* can become *homo sapiens*' (p. 212).

Homo Necans is a sweeping and imaginatively compelling account of the origins of sacrifice, detecting survivals of Palaeolithic practice in the narratives of the *Odyssey* and even the rituals of classical Athens. Ever since Frazer and Freud, we have been fascinated with seeing ineradicable survivals of primitive patterns in our own culture, and *Homo Necans* provides a cultural synthesis whose scope and fascination rival that of *The Golden Bough*, while possessing a far sounder basis in scholarship. In the process, Burkert gives new life to a question that is powerfully present from Greek times onwards: that of the relationship between man the sacrificer and man the hunter. Elsewhere, he evokes other instinctual or biological patterns which might be expressed in sacrificial practice: the lizard's 'sacrifice' of its tail when in danger, for example.⁶ To some extent, he thus argues, the principle of sacrifice predates the Stone Age, and indeed humanity itself. Yet the expectation of reciprocation implicit in many forms of sacrifice is a distinctively human characteristic, since it involves a sense of time – the ability conceptually to link past and future – that only *Homo sapiens* possesses. Sacrifice thus distinguishes man from the animal, yet expresses itself in that which most closely unites them: the capacity for lethal violence.

Sacrifice is a varied and complex phenomenon, whose nature and origins have been variously explained. Burkert is one interpreter among many, and his work has been challenged on a number of grounds: that, for example, it over-interprets the positioning of animal bones in Palaeolithic sites, or that sacrifice originates in agrarian rather than hunting societies, and is then projected back upon the earlier stages of culture. Greek sacrificial animals

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were invariably domesticated, and Marcel Detienne has pointed out the degree to which the violence in Greek sacrificial rites is hidden, so as to create an absolute polarity between sacrifice and the hunt.⁷ In terms of popular reception, moreover, Burkert's work is outstripped by the far less rigorously argued theories of René Girard, which locate the origins of sacrifice in hypothetical primeval crises, where the community is in danger of collapse as a result of spreading mob violence. The gathering violence is controlled by being focussed on a single individual: a scapegoat in the loose, modern sense of the word; and, in order to break the cycle of reciprocation, it is essential that the victim be not at all connected with any of the foregoing acts of violence. The origins of sacrifice have their own structural logic, but it is the reverse of the logic of justice.⁸

Girard is by no means the only thinker, modern or otherwise, to base a theory of society upon an imaginary account of a primeval state of nature. One feature of his work that has drawn special comment is his use of culturally advanced literary texts such as *King Oedipus* to explicate assumed primitive social and mental states. There are, of course, well-known precedents for this, but Girard does not attempt to show by what chain of cause and effect a text such as *King Oedipus*, most of which is not 'myth' but Sophocles' invention, can express the conditions of man's primal state. His use of classical Athenian texts to illustrate the anthropology of quite other periods is also open to a more elementary challenge: he clearly misreads them.

Sacrifice is often regarded as a transaction with the gods: a gift given in expectation of return. The transaction is, of course, an important feature of sacrifice, though not the only or perhaps the oldest one, and both Girard and Burkert in different ways seek to penetrate to the earliest mental stages of sacrifice. So did Frazer's now discredited key to all mythologies, which derived myth from sacrifices designed to secure the continuity of the vegetative cycle (though some of the cults of dying and risen gods, which he regards as preserving very primitive religious structures, in fact appear to have developed quite late).⁹ A more durable theory, also dating from the late nineteenth century, is that of Hubert and Mauss, who argue that 'in every sacrifice an object passes from the common into the religious domain', and that the process of transference involved in sacrifice effects a transformation in the sacrificer.¹⁰ More recently, Miranda Aldhouse Green has pointed out that, originally, to sacrifice (literally make holy) was associated neither semantically nor in practice with giving something up:

sacrificial activity may originally have been linked with communal feasting, involving both humans and the gods in a sacred partnership, rather than being contingent upon the giving and receiving of gifts. The function of such commensality (collective ritual feasting) was probably associated with the creation of a bond between people and the supernatural world, between the sacrificers and the divine recipient, through the slaughter and consumption of animal victims.¹¹