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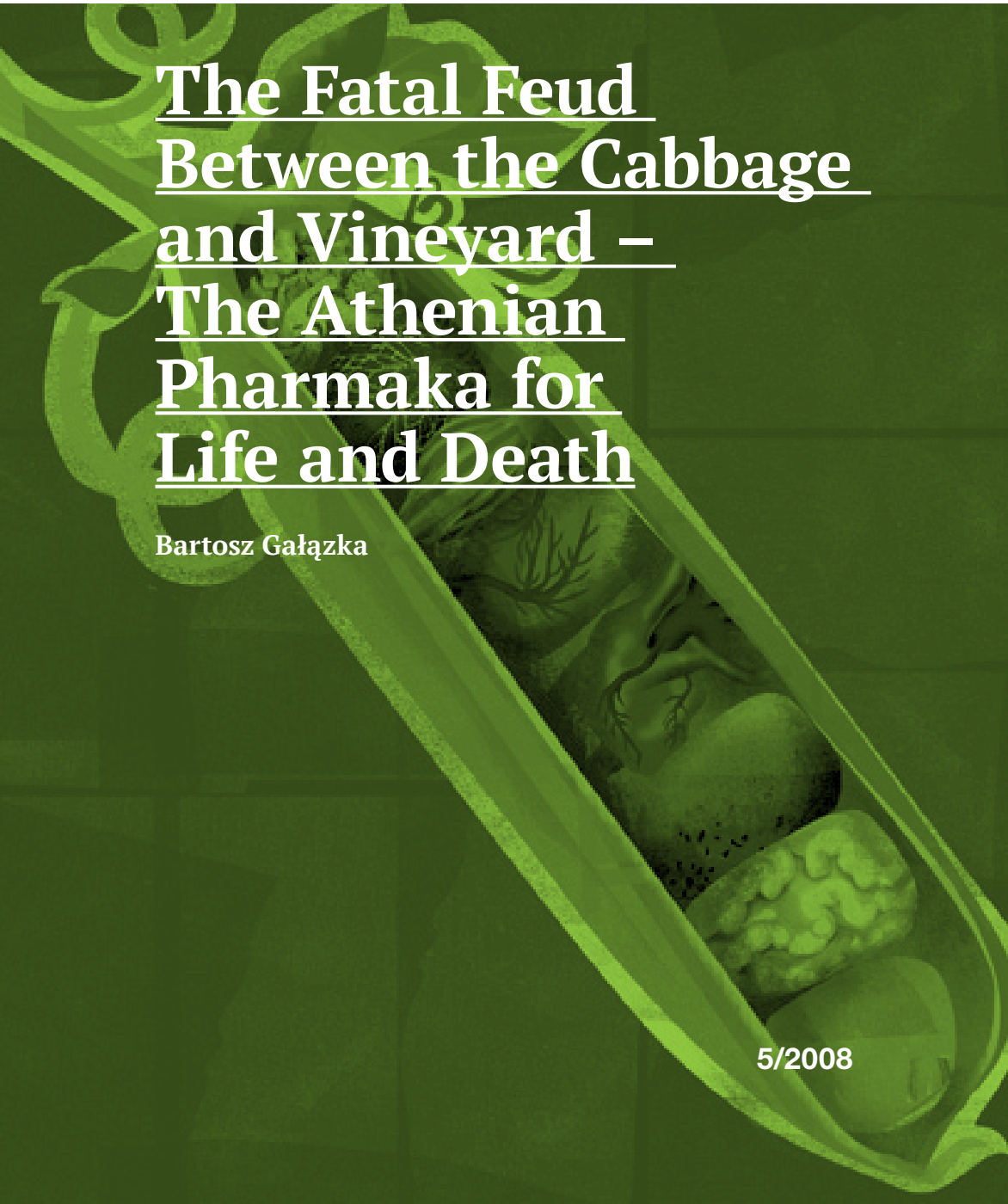

The Fatal Feud Between the Cabbage and Vineyard – The Athenian Pharmaka for Life and Death

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Even in a magnet there must be concealed the seed of life, "[it] has a soul because it causes movement to iron,"[1] as we read in the second chapter of Book I of Aristotle's *De Anima* (405a), where, beside the Pythagoreans' concepts, Democritus' and Anaximander's theories, the Stagirite cites the view of Thales, who initiated natural science, grounding it in philosophy. Beside the central question about *arche* – the origin or principle of all things – the text devotes significant attention to the problem of life and its nature. All that lives, lives because there is *empsychos*, a fullness of soul. This concerns humans, animals and plants, and, in a sense, the whole world is full

1 Aristotle, *On the Soul. Parva Naturalia. On Breath*, translated by W.S. Hett. Loeb Classical Library 288. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957, p. 27.

of soul: as long as it so, it remains in motion. It is possible to move, according to Aristotle, in four ways: from place to place, by change of quality, by diminution, and by augmentation (*De Anime* I 3, 406a). *Empsychos* is primarily concerned about a certain eupsychia – its finest state. This finest state appears to those who remain in motion derived from an internal source (the soul, *psyche*) in the form of a dynamic balance. All that remains in motion and is concerned with its own welfare (and life by its very nature is capable of taking care of itself) aims at *homeostasis* – a dynamic state of internal integration and harmony with its surroundings because everything remains in community with everything else.

What is most characteristic of Greek thought, from Homer to the end of the Hellenistic era, is the experience of unity, inseparable from the deep conviction of the all-encompassing interrelationship of mutual influences, predetermined by Moira's dictates even before the world began. Empsychos is a strictly philosophical concept. Originally, for Homer, the soul is merely something that can be lost, by perishing in a battle or as result of an unfortunate stroke of fate; it is merely a shadow, a little figure which becomes separated from the dying body in order to pass to Hades. The beginning of the systematic study of nature leads to a gradual formation of a view which gives the soul a distinguished position. It becomes the seat of moral dispositions and, above all, the principle and source of life in all its dimensions. It is no longer the breath (*phren*), heart (*kardia*) or vital force (*thymos*), but

the psyche that is the distinctive mark of a living being. Movement, the capability of independent motion, determines the position in a hierarchy of beings that ranges from divinity to a stone. With the growth of the scientific study of nature, in Ionia and Milet there appears a philosophical faith that the cosmos is not only beautiful but also, in a way, animate (*empsychos*). Even Democritus' cosmos is in a ceaseless harmonic motion providing a dynamic model of perfection also attainable in the political and individual dimensions. After Plato's interlude, this faith is revived by the initiators of the main currents and schools of the Hellenistic era, which stemmed from critical reconsiderations of Socratic thought. Motion goes from the celebrated Aristotelian *theoria* back to *aesthesis*, which, in order to manifest its happiness-giving strength, must always operate – in keeping with the stoical appeal – in accordance with nature.

Zoon are animals and people. The latter are given quite a unique life because they are capable of determining its shape an accordance with their intentions (*logos*). To pass through life is more than just to live it. Undoubtedly, plants are also *zen* – capable of feeling love (affinity) and hatred (antipathy). It is telling that this type of disposition is what incorporates them into the cycle of life, understood in the broadest possible way, in the sense of the Greek word *zoe*, rendering it of significance to *biai* (from Greek sg. *bios* – *life*, bio-graphy – life story), human lives, among which they can reveal their beneficial power or cut short the fast current of one or another story when

they manifest their poisonous qualities. While in the mythologies of most peoples it is animal symbolism that dominates, the space of the Greeks' spiritual experience is Persephone's colourful wreath of flowers, leaves and cereals. The rhythm of the landscape is marked by Zeus' mighty oak in Dodona; Poseidon's towering pine trees in Corinth and Onchestus, from whose boughs the wreathes worn by the winners of the Isthmian Games were made, and whose wood was used to construct the best ships; and the drowsy elms shading village graveyards and guarding the gates of Hades. At the close of July and in August, manna (vegetable honey for which the Greeks had the same name – *meli*) flows copiously from ash trees; apple trees, almond trees and olive trees bear fruit. There is also the grapevine, into which Dionysus changed Ampelos the satyr, and then taught people how to produce wine out of its fruit. The metamorphic imagination easily turns gods and people into plants, each of which then reveals its own peculiar nature. Cyparissus, (Apollo's *eromenos*) after a suicidal death changes into a cypress, Hyacinth into a flower of the same name, Daphne into a laurel tree, the Heliades – the daughters of Helios – into amber-bearing poplars, and Athena changes her beloved priestess Moria, after her death, into an olive tree. "For I have been ere now a boy and a girl, a bush and a bird and a dumb fish in the sea", we read in Empedocles' *Purifications* (excerpt 117, Burnet).

Plants also have a significant meaning for the history of philosophy. A key role is played by fennel, marigold and

hemlock. Prometheus concealed the fire stolen from Zeus in a cleverly hollowed out fennel stalk (giant fennel; Latin *ferula communis*); the *philosophikos bios* was voiced in Greece on a bed of flowers, and a plant extract plays a vital role in the culminating moment. *Phusis krypesthai philei*: nature loves to hide, and a dry soul, dried by fire, is best, Heraclitus says (118). Without fire, the *kinetikon*, the moveable part of the soul, would remain undried.

Calendula officinalis (marigold) grows copiously on one of the hills of Hymettus, where Plato's parents went just after his birth. This food of the Athenian poor, who gorged on its leaves, and coloured the simplest dishes with its golden petals (in place of priceless saffron), processed by the industrious bees inhabiting the region in great numbers still today, becomes Plato's first food. The Muses of Helicon turned Hesiod into a poet; the plenitude of Hymettian flowers changed Aristocles into Plato, *ho philosophus*, a lover of wisdom. Pilgrims today still visit Kaisariani monastery, situated roughly in the same place, to experience the healing power of prayers and herbs. *Conium maculatum*, or, more precisely, the juice from the plant's rootstalk (colloquially known as hemlock, poison hemlock, or water parsley) was Socrates' last meal, instead of the long awaited feast in Prytaneion. The origin of the author of the formula for the Athenian drug acquires a symbolical significance (Pliny mentions *publica Atheniensum pena invisa* in his *History*). Theophrastus ascribes it to an eminent *rhizotom* (herbalist who cut roots), Thrasyas of Mantinea, the home city of Diotima, whose

speech, cited by Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, is of crucial importance to understanding the erotic intention of his philosophical dialectic. Diotima's words are, in accordance with the concept of the role of writing in *Phaedrus*, *pharmakon* for Socrates' body; hemlock turns out to be pharmakon for the soul. Plato assumes his medical heritage and, by doing so, fulfils the obligation to make an offering to Asclepius imposed by Socrates when in his last moments of life he reminds Crito about the necessity of offering a rooster to the father of the art of medicine as a token of thanks for providing the perfect cure for the disease of life that has been tormenting his soul for nearly seventy years. *Philosophia* turns out to be *therapeia*, a means of treatment. This is testified to by an inscription which, according to tradition, was supposed to have been placed on his gravestone. "If Phoebus (...) did not cause Plato to be born in Greece, / how came it that he healed the minds of men by letters? / As the god's son Asclepius is a healer of the body, / so is Plato of the immortal soul (D.L. III. 45).[2] In both dimensions – somatic and spiritual – the treatment is carried out with the aid of dietetic means. In relation to the body, the foundation of one's diet and of dietetic-therapeutic intervention is vegetable foods. Its success requires a knowledge of both the character and personal condition of the patient, but also of the powers that lie in plants and how to influence them with the aid of art so that they manifest themselves in the manner expected.

2 D. Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, *Volume I: Books 1-5*, trans. R.D. Hicks. Cambridge 1925, p. 317

The ambivalent power of plants stems from their kinship with people. Its character is tested only in their encounters. Every substance works differently, depending on the dosage and who and in what form takes it. A symbol of this ambiguity is the serpent entwined around the rod of Asclepius (caduceus). Its venom is fatal in great quantities but taken in a therapeutic dose it can relieve suffering. The dual nature of plants is also illustrated by the story of Odysseus and his companions, whom deceitful Circe transformed into swine (using mandragora); only Odysseus preserved his human form, since he was well protected by garlic! What makes plants not only provide nourishment but also affect humans, supporting their body's natural strength or leading to its exhaustion? Love and hatred, affinity and antipathy, also permeate their souls in their mutual relations. They are, like people, *empsychos*, and are concerned with their own well-being. Teophrastus, the author of *Historia plantorum*, tries to explore the general factors which influence the vegetable life in a systematic way. In *De plantarum causis* there is a particularly interesting chapter (Book Two) devoted to the impact of the environment on the condition of plants. Theophrastus emphasises, among other things, the significance of the kind and quality of soil, the lay of the land, and hydrological conditions. What is most essential, however, is the immediate surroundings, which sometimes bring benefits but often contribute to serious harm or even death. Theophrastus also draws attention to the plant's inherent ability to move, and reports on his diurnal observations of the movement of leaves and

flowers patiently awaiting the sun. Pliny the Elder makes direct mention of the friendship and hatred between plants. Chapter one of Book XXIV of *Natural History* ("The remedies derived from the forest trees") is entirely devoted to the emotions provoked by an undesirable neighbourhood. Pliny suggestively describes the reaction of a grapevine when cyclamens or oregano sprouts appear in its vicinity. An even stronger feud exists between the grapevine and the cabbage. It makes both plants wither rapidly.

The nourishing qualities of plants are exhaustively described in Book II of the Hippocrates' treatise *On Diet*, one of the most interesting and still insufficiently researched works of his collected works (*Corpus Hippocraticum*). The basic question for Hippocrates' iatrike techne is aesthesis, an accurate intuition about the therapeutic intervention into one's life. Aesthesis has both a moral and aesthetic sense, which for the Greeks were inseparable: a beautiful and good life must be active while the foundation of activity is the health of the body. "Are we not astonished by the fitness and independence of the soul in comparison to the limitations and sluggishness of the body?", Albert Savini wonders. "Depending on its talents the soul may be happy, rich, loved, and praised, while the body must be satisfied with what it has, though what it has is not much."[3] The task of the art of medicine art is to provide support for the philosophical strategy of *metastrophe*:

3 A. Savinio, *"Dusza i psyche". Wyjście z labiryntu. Szkice rozproszone z lat 1943-1952*, ed. & trans. S. Kasprzysiak. Warszawa 2001, p. 64. (fragments quoted in the article translated into English by J.M)

turning (by means of a spiritual diet) towards the truth, to dietary agents, the use of which, as in the case of the former understanding of human souls and the types of *logos* applied to them, requires familiarity with the character of what we are going to employ to overcome our somatic incommensurability.

The Hippocratic dietary therapy is subordinated to the principle of *allelopathy*. Disease iscaused by neglecting to care for the body's welfare. Greek doctors, building upon Empedocles' theory about the four roots of all things, the four elements, and breaking with the pre-rational view that diseases affect people because of *hybris* (the pride they display before the gods), and that the restoration of health depends upon the ritual purgation of this kind of stain, conceived of all kinds of ailments, including psychological ones, as the result of an improperly balanced mixing, in which one of the body's juices wrongly gained dominance over the others, thus disturbing the state of natural balance (*isomoria*). Only changes to one's dietary regime and way of life could lead to the restoration of the original state, and in the future prevent the return of the ailment. On the part of the patient, it was crucial to analyse the general circumstances and conditions of his or her life since each character required a different treatment. The doctor's task, then, is to support nature (or at least not to hinder it), in order to restore the desired state as quickly as possible. Practices in this area were organised by the principle of oppositions: therapeutic methods and agents were selected to produce a result opposite to the

one that was recognised as pathological by the doctor. Greek doctors discovered very early that the symptoms of an illness could be extinguished by the application of *pharmakon*, a medicine producing in a healthy man effects gently imitating the progress of the illness, acting therefore as a kind of poison (*pharmakon*).

To dry what is wet, to warm what is cold, to cool what is hot – nature is capable of doing this. Therapy proves to be based on amity between the patient and doctor, and, above all, between the patient and nature, which supports him in his ongoing struggle. What is most important is to recognise which qualities found in food might contribute to snuffing out the destabilizing impact of the element that is out of balance. Chapter fifty-four of *On Diet* (Book II) is entirely devoted to plants; the author meticulously enumerates the various effects of dishes made out of them that need to be considered while preparing a salutary dietary regime. The qualities of many of them are well known to those who uses them; others may well turn out to be surprising. To get warm it is best to use garlic, but although it purifies the body, it is not good for the eyes; onion may prove better since it is good for the eyes, it is more nourishing than garlic and is capable of warming and drying us. It can be replaced by leek but not radish because it is difficult to digest. Mustard, dried purslane and canip also have warming qualities. To achieve the opposite effect lettuce can be helpful (though it cannot be overused because it can make us weak!), as well as juices (extracts) made from endive, parsley and mint. The lat-

ter has a certain unusual power: not only does it prevent vomiting but also, if consumed often, "mixes and sets in motion sperm preventing spontaneous erections" (*On Diet* II, 54).

The beauty of the forest cannot be seen from the road – it can be only experienced; you cannot see it but you can enter it. The power of plants cannot be felt unless friendly relations are established or revived, if they have been broken. After all, all of nature is full of souls.

translated by Joanna Maciulewicz